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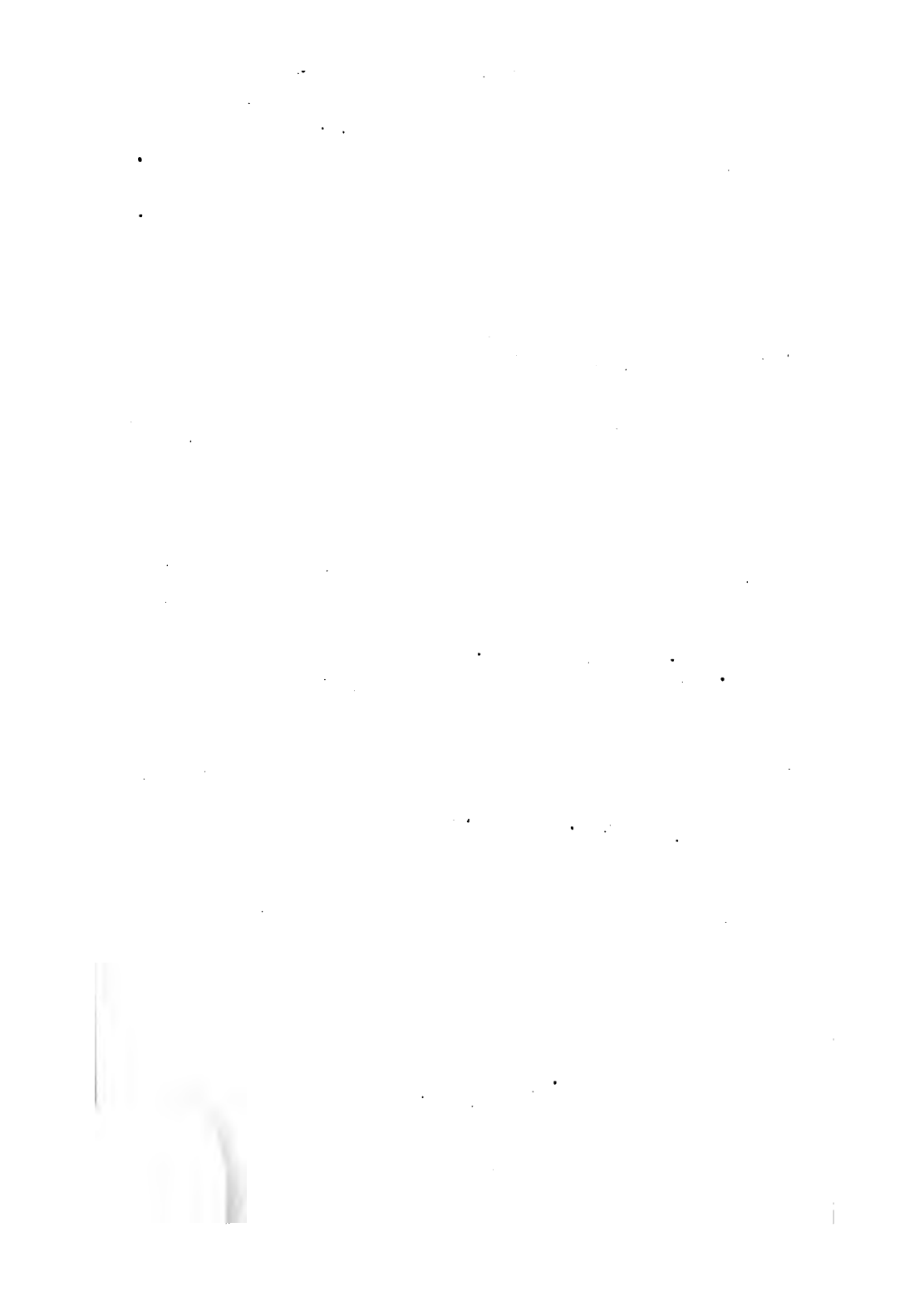
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ALL FOR HERSELF.

VOL. II.

ALL FOR HERSELF.

BY

SHIRLEY SMITH.

"Cosi fan tutte."

"In law what plea so tainted and corrupt
But, being seasoned with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil."

Merchant of Venice.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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ALL FOR HERSELF.

CHAPTER I.

BUT before the shadow passed away from Helen's mind—if indeed it ever wholly disappeared—her conduct had more than once puzzled her attentive and devoted lover. Mrs. Westbrook was the kindest and most considerate of *chaperons*, and used to leave him alone with Helen for hours, and once when Lord Forrester, who was very tender, but not very demonstrative, had been unusually moved, and had quite startled the girl by the depth of the love which she had inspired, she had clung to

him, and between laughing and crying, had wildly asked him if it would make any difference in his love if he were to find out that she was less perfect than he believed her to be.

"I suppose we are all more or less blind when we are in love, my darling!" he had answered fondly, "but I do not think I am likely to find that you are much less perfect than you appear to me now. You seem so natural, so truthful, that I cannot fancy time bringing to light any defect my lover's eyes have overlooked."

"But," she persisted, "if you should hear that, in the days before you knew me, I had done, or thought of doing, anything you disapproved, what then?"

"What can be the use of asking impossibilities, Nellie?" he answered, a little impatiently. "But this much I can tell you, if, after our marriage, I were to find out that your love was all a pretence, and

that, liking some one else better, you had married me for my position, and not for myself, I think I should go mad, for, unfortunately, a man too often remains the slave of a woman's beauty long after respect and esteem have vanished. I might still be your lover, while my whole soul revolted against you as the friend and companion of my life, the completion of myself."

Helen but vaguely understood his meaning. Her own experience, and the precepts of her sister, had not been of a nature to teach her to discriminate between the pure adoration of the mind, and the coarser worship of the senses; but every hour she spent with her lover brought home more clearly the new knowledge to her, and made him infinitely more dear to her heart, and more noble in her eyes.

Lord Forrester's character was, without doubt, an uncommon one, and it met with but scant appreciation in a world which is

so essentially selfish, coarse, and voluptuous in idea, if tolerably refined in words and actions. He had fallen in love at first, as the majority of young men are wont to do, with Helen's lovely face and graceful form; then he began to invest her in his own mind with a thousand charms and virtues which she did not possess, until, as is often the case with men of his ardent and romantic temperament, he ran the risk of loving an ideal instead of a real woman.

All this was before his engagement. When she had accepted him, and when his fancy had no longer room, as it were, to play around her, his devotion became less ethereal; but it is not too much to say that had illness or accident made his beautiful Helen a helpless cripple for life, he would still have made her his wife, and have loved her as fondly and faithfully as he had done when she was in all the pride of

health and beauty. To know that she was his by the bond of sympathy only would not have disappointed him half so deeply as would the discovery of her idiotic and wholly indefensible elopement with Percival.

It was only, as I have said, by degrees that Helen learned all this, and so, while her fear of detection grew less and less as the days went on, her fear of the consequences of detection, should it ever occur, daily and hourly increased. In proportion as she felt pride in having won love such as Lord Forrester had given to her, so in proportion did she feel some of the sharp agony it would cause her to lose his confidence and respect.

Constant and intimate intercourse with him had ample power to counteract the insidious, and therefore dangerous, influence of Cecilia, who tried hard to impress upon her that the whole duty of a

married woman is to keep her husband in a state of happy ignorance respecting her mode of life when out of his sight.

The marriage was to take place from Rutland Gate, and then Lord and Lady Forrester, having spent the honeymoon at Beauwood Chase, were to come to town for the season. In the autumn they intended to make a tour abroad in order to meet Lady Olivia, if she were not able to come to England before that time.

The wedding was a quiet one, at the special request of both bride and bridegroom; but Cecilia took care that an elaborate description of the ceremony should appear in all the fashionable newspapers. And there was special mention made of the dress of the bride's sister, Mrs. Westbrook; and those of Lord Forrester's friends and relatives who were not in town for the marriage, called at Rutland Gate soon after they came up for the "season,"

and they were one and all completely fascinated by the beautiful young widow.

The first drawing-room was held soon after the marriage, and Mrs. Westbrook was presented by Lady Belgravia, who had called upon her and been specially attentive at the request of the dowager and Lady Frederica. Such an introduction was enough; cards and invitations poured in thick and fast, and almost, as it seemed, without an effort on her own part, Cecilia found herself the most admired and sought after woman in London.

She could scarcely believe that one of the summits of her ambition had been so easily attained; but with the strange perversity of her nature she knew that her success would have had more value in her eyes if it had been more difficult of attainment.

But there was still one goal unreach-

and the barriers which seemed to attend her progress towards it made her more contented with the smoothness of the road over which she had hitherto passed.

Universal as was the admiration she excited, and notwithstanding the crowd of adorers who would fain have ridden by her side in the Row, and who gathered round her carriage when she had it drawn up close to the rails in the afternoon, the wished-for duke had not appeared to carry off the prize, and it seemed as if the "strawberry leaves" were not for her. Her proposals certainly averaged one, if not two, a week! Guardsmen, over head and ears in debt, vowed to her that they were also over head and ears in love. A battered and used-up old *roué* or two perjured themselves by declaring that they were heart-broken for her sake, and that never before in the course of their sinful old lives had they known what love was. Languid

swells in the Foreign Office, who were vain enough to believe that their noble names were a fair equivalent for her splendid fortune, stared hard when she refused them, and declared that, "By Jove! they were ill-used!"

A young squire from one of the Midland Counties, the head of a fine old family, with a good temper, a healthy appetite, noble digestion, and a fair, unencumbered rent-roll, came up to enjoy himself for a week or two in town, was introduced to Cecilia at a dinner-party, and fell an honest and sincere victim to her matchless beauty. She might willingly have given all her money in charity, as far as he was concerned, if she would but accept him for her husband; but some instinct, stronger even than love in his simple heart, warned him not to risk a refusal, and he went back to the shires a sadder and a thinner man.

The blind adulation of such a man, and the flattery of the fortune-hunters, were the very essence of this vain woman's life ; and yet, in the midst of her ambitious dreams and her social triumphs, there had come to her, what comes sooner or later to all women, no matter how selfish and heartless they may be, just a gleam of something better and purer—the vision of a life crowned by love alone.

One of the guests at Helen's wedding was a young man, a cousin of Lord Forrester's, and a few years younger than he, the only child of his father's sister, a wilful young beauty, who had married—of course against the wishes of her family—a man years older, and in a lower grade of life than herself. He was very poor, but a perfect gentleman in mind and manners, and a most accomplished artist ; and when he found that he was getting too fond of his pretty, wayward pupil, the Lady Sarah

Forrester, he tried most honourably to draw back.

But it was too late ; the girl loved him ; and when she had let him know it, he could not give her up, so she became Lady Sarah Saville. And when, after a happy marriage of two years, she died in giving birth to a son, the shock to her husband was so great that he never rallied, and little Edward was left an orphan at a year old.

He was brought up by his mother's family, and her fortune, not a very large one, was settled upon him ; but he was generally in trouble of one kind or another, being a regular genius, with, as it seemed, "every gift except the gift of the power to use them."

He would not follow any profession—he intended one year to be an artist, another an author, the next a dramatist, and at the time of the marriage of his cousin and boyish friend and ally, Lord

Forrester, he was living in London, a thorough Bohemian in tastes and habits ; but he was so gentlemanlike, so handsome, and, in manner, so fascinating, that he was a favourite with everyone, and although life in Bohemia was far more congenial to his taste than he ever found it in the drawing-rooms of the "swells," as he called his relations and their friends, he was sure to appear at any special festivity, such as the marriage of his cousin, looking as great a swell as the best of them.

He was always going to paint the best picture of the year, to write the tragedy which Irving would make immortal, or the poem that would make him famous in a day, but somehow the picture remained in outline on the canvas, and the tragedy and poem in the fertile brain of the author. The interest of his poor mother's fortune gave him an ample income, so he was not driven to work for his bread, and he lived

the happiest and simplest of lives, making friends for himself wherever he went, without, as it seemed, any effort of his own.

One day, about a year and half before Lord Forrester's marriage, Saville had met in that most unromantic of all places, a station of the Underground Railway, a young girl, whose sweet face had haunted him for months. His meeting with her had been the result of accident, and although in every public place which he frequented, in the streets, in omnibusses, at railway stations, on board penny steamboats, in out-of-the-way churches in the City, he had watched eagerly, in the hope of again coming across her, he had been always disappointed.

He had been able to render her a very trifling service at their first meeting. She had come out without her purse, and he had begged to be allowed to pay her fare.

She insisted upon being allowed to refund the money, and although he at first demurred, he finally agreed, in the hope that her letter containing the money would also give him her name and address.

But he was disappointed. He got a shilling's worth of stamps, folded in a sheet of note-paper, on which was written "With many thanks." The postmark was Charing Cross, so he had no clue. He saw her again at the same station at the end of a week, but she did not speak to him, and again at the end of a fortnight, when he spoke to her; but she gave him no encouragement, and after that she disappeared altogether, and, of course, not being a conjurer, he could not tell that his cousin, Lady Olivia Forrester, knew all about her, and, moreover, could have made him happy with the information that the girl had thought quite as much about him as he had done about her.

But although the little incident ended in disappointment, it inspired him to write some charming little love lyrics, which appeared in one of the monthly magazines, and to cover sheet after sheet of drawing-paper with highly idealized portraits of the unknown, while the note-paper in which she had enclosed the stamps was treasured up as a memorial of her.

The romantic episode had in some degree faded from his impressionable mind at the time of his cousin's marriage, and that event sent his thoughts for the time being into a fresh channel.

CHAPTER II.

EDWARD SAVILLE thought his sweet new cousin Helen the loveliest creature he had ever seen, except her sister, Mrs. Westbrook. Her beauty, her graceful movements, and the apparently unstudied simplicity of every action—the effect, in reality, of the very highest art—completely fascinated him, and he felt actually struck dumb with admiration.

He was generally the life of every party which he joined, but on this occasion he was totally unlike himself. His eyes followed Mrs. Westbrook about wherever she went; he would break off a conversation in order to listen, if he heard her voice at the

far end of the room ; in short, he behaved himself in the most idiotic and laughable manner ; but then his eccentricities were always not only tolerated, but pardoned by his friends. Lord Forrester, however, took him to task, half jestingly, when Helen had gone away, after the breakfast, to change her dress, and had warned him against falling in love.

"My dear boy," Saville had answered, "you might as well warn me not to fall in love with the Queen of Sheba, if there is such a lady on the earth at present ! I am simply frightened, there is no other word for it, by Mrs. Westbrook's beauty ! I do not covet it in the least, except as I might covet a beautiful picture or statue, just to put on a pedestal to gaze at."

"How long would that last ?" laughed his cousin.

"Longer than you think," replied Saville gravely ; "but at the same time I must

confess that I am looking at her to-day in a sort of maze ! I can hardly realize that she is common flesh and blood ! And you tell me that she has over thirty thousand a year ; well, that is natural and material enough in all conscience !” Then, after a pause, he added, while one of his sweet bright smiles broke over his mouth, “ As your sister-in-law, Arthur, she must be my cousin ; do you think I might call her by her name ? ”

“ Not without my express permission,” said the voice of the charmer close behind him. “ I never allow anyone that privilege until he has proved his devotion to me for a twelvemonth, and then only on Sundays.”

“ Tell me how to crowd the devotion of a twelvemonth into one day, or one hour, that my probation may be the sooner over ! ” he replied, catching her tone. “ But then I am never in town on Sundays, so I could not enjoy what I had earned.”

“And where do you spend your Sundays, if not in town?” she asked.

“That,” he answered, with assumed gravity, “is a secret which I cannot tell, even to you.”

“And yet you expect favours from me, and refuse such very common-place information,” she replied, with a pretty pout.

“I expect favours?” he repeated. “Ah, no, Mrs. Westbrook. If you knew me better you would know that I never attempt impossibilities; that you graciously accord me this audience is, I fear, but a proof——” he stopped short.

“That what?”

“That you have not anything better to do just at this moment,” he continued, with that saucy air which became him so well. “But then when any good happens to me in this world I do not ask how it comes, I simply enjoy it.”

“Have you seen my conservatory?” she

asked inconsequently, and getting, as she expected, an answer in the negative, she walked away with him out of the crowd, pleased, as she always was, at the prospect of a new victim.

On further acquaintance he proved so original and delightful that Cecilia was perfectly charmed with him; and as she never thought it was in the least necessary to hide her feelings, she was presently so bewitchingly frank and cordial that the awe inspired by her beauty passed rapidly away, and Saville felt as much at home with her as if he had known her for years, and was as merry and audacious as if he had been the spoiled pet of a gay Bohemian gathering instead of the guest of a fashionable lady whom he had met that day for the first time.

Some of the wedding guests were to dine at Rutland Gate to meet Mr. and Mrs. Calvert who had come up for the

wedding, and Cecilia asked Saville to join the party. "It will be as deadly stupid as all family gatherings are," she said.

"And you expect me, as one of the family, to come and add my stupidity to the general stock ; take care, Mrs. Westbrook, perhaps I may develop a new faculty under new inspiration, and astonish you all with my brilliancy !"

"It would surprise me far more to find you the opposite of brilliant," she answered, with the most open flattery in look and tone. This young fellow was not showing as many signs of capture as others, older than he, had shown in less time, and it would never do to allow him to escape from her unharmed.

Throughout the evening she contrived, with that ingenuity which seemed so artless in her, to single him out for particular attention without making him conspicuous. She found out that he could sing, and she

played accompaniments for him with her well-taught accuracy, but with a want of true feeling for the music which jarred upon his sensitive ear.

The attention which courtesy obliged her to pay to other guests called her at length from the piano, and then he sat down and sang a love-song of his own composition, which was, of course, new to everyone in the room. The words were as follows:—

Oh ! maiden, with the soft eyes full of fancies
Which through the world in search of beauty stray,
Whilst others bask in sunshine of your glances,
Keep one tender thought for me to-day.
Have I not mused on thee in woodpaths lonely,
Where song-birds chant in liquid notes thy name ?
Have I not dreamed of thee and loved thee only,
Trusting to Time my passion to proclaim ?
Then, maiden, with the soft eyes full of fancies,
Oh ! keep one tender thought for me to-day.

Now, maiden, thou art pledged my lot to lighten,
A pledge so sweetly sealed can we forget ?
Like kindred stars each other's path we'll brighten ;
And trust me, darling, thou shalt ne'er regret.

Though days to come be sometimes touched by sadness,
Like autumn tints now tangled in your hair,
The current of our lives shall glide in gladness,
And naught but love itself be imaged there.
Then, maiden, with the soft eyes full of fancies,
Oh! keep one tender thought for me to-day.

When the sweet melody of the opening bars caught Cecilia's ear, she went back to the piano and sat down in a low chair, placed so as to command a full view of the singer's face.

Saville's song was one of the many which he had written to the unknown girl by whom his thoughts had been filled for so long, and as he sang the words which he had, in fancy, dedicated to her, his mind was again, for the moment, centred upon her, and he threw such intense expression into the music that Mrs. Westbrook was moved as she had never been moved before. Music had always appealed to her senses, but this night a chord, which lay far deeper than mere sensuous pleasure,

was touched, and it vibrated for many and many a day. She lay back in her chair watching, with dreamy eyes, the expressive face of the handsome young poet and musician, and as the last words of the refrain of the second verse died away, she knew that tears were blotting him out of her sight. Never before had she felt so gentle and so womanly, never before had anything so nearly approaching disgust at the artificial life she had led almost from her childhood assailed her, and she longed to be alone that she might unburden her heart by tears.

Wondering at her silence, for her compliments at the end of each song had been, until then, but too profuse, Saville turned to look at her, and he was startled by the change in her face. She looked then what he did not think until that moment she could have ever seemed in his eyes: a woman whom it might be possible to sway

through her feelings; and had she but known it, she might, by keeping up that mood, have brought him quickly enough to her feet. But she had no confidence in anything except her beauty and her wealth. It was one of her axioms that a man could be influenced only through his senses or his purse, and it must be confessed that hitherto her own experience had not proved her to be mistaken. With the exception of Percival, the many men who had aspired to her hand, had been avowed fortune-hunters. Percival, she knew, would have wished to make her his wife had their positions been reversed, and sometimes, in unambitious moments, she found herself wishing that the wealth were his, and that she had nothing to give except her beauty.

She had learned quickly enough that Saville in many respects differed from the men who hovered about her continually,

but she did not for a moment imagine that his poetic and romantic temperament lifted him so far above his fellows that he had hardly a thought or feeling in common even with those whom he called associates and friends. He had, it is true, his hours of extreme weakness, when the lower and coarser instincts, inseparable from human nature, attacked him fiercely; but the pure and noble spirit of the man soon shook off such mere earthly trammels; and if his fall had been sudden, his recovery was certain to be as prompt and sure.

Long after her guests had left her, Mrs. Westbrook sat on alone in her drawing-room, but not, as was usual with her, thinking over plans which were formed, not to give pleasure to others, but to advance her own ambitious designs. She had found popularity easy of achievement, but she wished, above all things, to keep on her side even those to whom she refused

her special favours. Women who showed jealousy had to be conciliated, and men who aspired to marriage had to be skilfully kept in their place as useful friends. But on this particular night all her schemes were set aside, and she gave herself up to a dream of the future, in which not one element of ambition mingled.

She was half angry with herself for her weakness, as she called it, and the more so that it was so very probable her dream would, if she willed it, prove true. Of course Saville would fall in love; and if her present state of mind continued, she could not refuse to be his wife, if he were bold enough to make her an offer.

"Ah, yes," she said, following out her train of thought, "with him; and for his sake, I think it might be possible to live the life he loves."

Saville had inveighed to her against the—to him—hateful slavery of fashionable

life in London, and had sketched out rapidly at her request his ideal of an existence which would be, in his estimation, simply perfect. There was much that was extremely poetical and unpractical about his scheme, and so Mrs. Westbrook had laughingly told him; but her mind dwelt longingly upon the picture, and she believed that, with him, banishment to that enchanting island in the warm southern sea, where he told her he longed to have the power to make his future home, would be bearable.

“With my money we might manage to surround ourselves with English comforts,” Cecilia thought, with a little sigh of regret that this singularly fascinating young poet could not content himself with Rutland Gate and Richmond. And then, for the time being, romance was put aside, and the reign of worldly wisdom set in anew. Before a month was over, he would

be so completely *her* slave that if she agreed to give up ambition for his sake, he would, in gratitude for the sacrifice, consent to remain in England, and to take permanently that place in society to which he was entitled by birth.

CHAPTER III.

BY the end of April, Lord Forrester and his bride were at their town house. Easter was over, and the season had fairly set in, but Mrs. Westbrook was reluctantly obliged to admit that Saville was not her slave, although, had she been truthful even to herself, she must have acknowledged that she was his.

Yes, the beautiful woman, who had over and over again scoffed at love as the plague and pastime of silly schoolgirls, who had so ridiculed her sister's attachment to Lord Forrester that poor Helen was at last almost ashamed of loving him so dearly, was now herself in the toils of

the tyrant. But she was too thorough a woman of the world to betray herself in the slightest degree, even to herself. She tried to hide the fact, but she knew well enough what it was that made her heart beat so fast when she heard his voice, and what caused that strange and almost painful sensation of intense pleasure to take such complete possession of her, when, as sometimes happened, they were side by side in a crowded drawing-room, or at her own house.

To be alone in the crowd was, she soon found, more satisfactory than to be absolutely *tête-à-tête*, for the utmost effort of which she was capable was scarcely enough to put her at her ease with him, if he came to visit her and found her alone. She did so long to see on his part ^{*}even the slightest sign of departure from that perfect composure, and that bright flow of humour, which told her but too plainly that, how-

ever much he might admire her beauty, it had no lasting power over him.

The momentary feeling which had swayed him when he saw the agitation caused by his song, had entirely passed away, and there was not the slightest danger to his peace of mind in the familiar intercourse which had sprung up between him and the beautiful woman who was so very kind to him, and who took so much interest in his affairs. She very often asked him to dine when she expected her sister and Lord Forrester, knowing that it was probable they would have an engagement which would take them away early, and so leave her alone with Saville.

On these occasions—and she took care not to make them too frequent, lest they might lose their charm—she spared no pains to enhance her beauty by the aid of dress. She had often heard Saville express his admiration for natural flowers in the

hair, and from that hour, when she expected to be seen by him, she never wore any others. She had not waited for the orthodox year to pass to put off her mourning, but at Helen's wedding had appeared in white, which was particularly becoming to her beautiful complexion.

She was one evening going to a ball at M—— House, but knowing that she need not appear there until midnight, she asked the Forresters to dine, and Saville to meet them. She put on her ball-dress for dinner; it was white silk, with trimmings of rich lace, but the only ornaments upon it were trailing branches of wild roses upon the skirt, so cunningly made that they looked perfectly natural; but in her hair she wore the real flowers. Saville, who was the first to arrive, openly expressed his admiration. It was very pleasant to be told that he did not know another woman in London who could have borne the

ordeal of such a dress by daylight, but it would have pleased her better if he had stammered over his speech, and if he had looked more than he said.

"What am I to do with him?" she thought, as he strolled away from her—he was on too friendly terms to be ceremonious—to look at a new water-colour she had lately bought. "I begin to think that he is either ice or marble."

As she anticipated, the Forresters had an engagement which they were obliged to keep before they went to the Royal ball, so by ten o'clock she and Saville were alone.

"Now," she said, opening the piano, "I want all my favourite songs." She knew that nothing seemed to influence him so much as music in that softly lighted room of hers.

"Are you going to play for me?" he asked, hesitating a moment before he sat

down; he thought it was only polite to ask her, but he liked to accompany himself.

"No," she answered, "you must play and sing too; we can have a duet later on, if you like."

An hour passed; he sang song after song, and every now and then he would turn round upon the music-stool and descant learnedly upon the beauties or faults of this and that composer without a trace of sentiment in either voice or eyes. If the beautiful creature who sat beside him had been an ugly old woman he could not have been more unmoved.

"Now never mind Wagner and Verdi," she said at last; "I do not understand the first, and I am tired of the second, and not one note of theirs has ever pleased me half so much as that little song of your own, the one you sang the first evening you were here."

Then, maiden, with the bright eyes full of fancies,
Oh, keep one tender thought for me to-day,"

she repeated the refrain in her low, sweet voice.

"Oh, you like that?" he said, and immediately began to sing.

As before, when she had heard it for the first time, her eyes were fixed upon the singer's bright, handsome young face, and, as before, they filled with unwelcome tears. "Oh, it is too much, I cannot bear it!" she moaned, almost before he had finished, and then she burst into tears.

Saville, puzzled beyond measure, only turned round upon his stool as usual and looked at her.

"I am awfully sorry," he said. "Is it that stupid little song? Please do not cry, Mrs. Westbrook—indeed, it is not worth your tears."

"No," she cried, with a sudden effort

at self-control, the source of which he did not guess, "you are quite right; it is not worth my tears, but"—and her lips quivered again at the maddening evidence of his utter indifference—"it was not altogether the song, it was—loneliness. You do not understand; people think I must be happy because I am rich, but far, far rather would I be your maiden with the bright eyes full of fancies." The words, as she used them, were so ambiguous that had he wished to find an opening for a tender speech they would have supplied it, but he took them simply as a reference to his song.

"Ah! Mrs. Westbrook," he said, "you cannot have any reason to envy anyone; you have everything that this world can give you."

"Except true love," she answered, very low.

"Well, I suppose," he said after a pause,

as if he had been considering the subject, "that any woman with such a fortune as you have, would feel rather doubtful whether a man really felt what he said if he spoke about love to you, and it might make a man who cared for you afraid of telling you so, but then you are so beautiful—do not shake your head, you know you are—that I think you might believe a fellow if he said he was dying about you."

"But if the right man, the man whom I could love, does not care for me, what then?"

"Ah! for that case I do not know what to advise," he answered, laughing—"in fact, I have no opinion upon the subject worth having. I have been haunted by an ideal woman for ever so long myself, and I shall probably, if I ever marry, choose some one very different—not a maiden with bright eyes, but—" he stopped short.

"Go on," she said.

"A kind, motherly sort of woman, who will look after me and make me work," he continued. "I am really ashamed of never having done anything yet, but I have got an idea for such a charming play."

Then he turned round to the piano again, and broke into a gay little French song, and Cecilia's heart grew sad and hard as she heard him. Before he had quite finished, her carriage was announced, and, with a little bow and cold good night, she had disappeared before he could stand up from the piano. But she had to go to her room first, to have some finishing touches put to her dress, and he was waiting to put her into the carriage when she at last came downstairs.

"Thank you for all your music," she said. And then she drove away from him with despair at her heart, and tears of mortification in her eyes. "I would rather

have a blow from his hand than a caress from any other hand in the world," she thought.

But at the ball she met more than enough of homage and adulation to satisfy her vanity, which was sorely wounded by Saville's indifference. The ever-faithful Percival was on the watch for her, and he reproached her for being so late—he had consoled himself during her absence by trying to make himself agreeable to Lady Forrester, whom he wished, for reasons of his own, to make a friend of. But the young bride gave him very little encouragement—he might ignore the past, but she could not forget it, and she thought it was little short of impertinence on his part to take for granted that his friendship with Cecilia authorised him to assume a familiar bearing towards herself. And, besides, her devoted and most exacting husband had given her to understand, in his most

pragmatical, but, of course, to her, kind and thoughtful, manner, that Percival was notorious for his flirtations with pretty young married women, and that she would do well to be on her guard against him.

The warning was, as we know, unnecessary in her case, but as she stood listening, with an indifference which was not put on, to Percival's really agreeable flow of talk, she could see Lord Forrester at some distance, looking far from well pleased ; but the rooms were full, and she could not make her escape, neither did her bridegroom wish to make himself too remarkable by being always at the side of his beautiful young wife.

"What a change a few months can make," Percival said, when he heard that Helen had dined at Rutland Gate, and that Mrs. Westbrook had been dressed for the ball at eight o'clock. He was thinking

that just a year ago the handsome, self-possessed, and dignified woman beside him, had been a simple, impressionable girl, upon whose feelings he could play with so much ease that the pastime had almost begun to lose its zest for him. He could hardly believe it possible that the episode of the elopement had ever taken place.

“A year ago I did not know you had a sister——”

But at that point a happy interruption had come to Helen, and she was taken away to be the partner of her Royal host in the quadrille just forming, and before the dance was over Mrs. Westbrook had arrived.

In answer to Percival's reproaches to her for being so late, she answered gaily that Mr. Saville had been singing for her, and that she had not noticed how the time passed. With a great effort Percival hid his chagrin, but the next morning he called

at Rutland Gate, and asked Cecilia, without circumlocution, if she intended to marry the young poet.

"We have not asked one another," she replied, laughing, to hide the confusion caused by his abrupt question.

"Some things can be settled without asking," Percival replied, moodily. "And I would give ten years of my life for one of the looks I have seen you give that young fellow! Ah! Queenie,"—the name was a compromise which he had instituted between the familiarity of her Christian name, to which she objected, and the formality of Mrs. Westbrook, which he abhorred—"Ah! Queenie, you do not treat me well. Did you not promise, and did you not seal the bond in a way that maddens me to remember, that if you ever married a commoner, you would choose me?"

"Bonds are made to be broken," replied

Cecilia, pleased at his perseverance, and angry that a compact not intended by her to be binding, should be brought up against her. "And, besides, if you bully me in this way when you have no authority over me, what might I expect if I were to marry you?"

"Perhaps a happier life than if you marry this mythical duke, or that handsome young poetaster you have taken up with lately," replied Percival, who was as honestly in love with Cecilia as it was in his nature to be with anyone. "I might be able, with a great effort, to reconcile myself to see you a duchess, but to see you—Mrs. Saville!"

It would be impossible to give an idea of the scorn which he threw into the words which had so sweet a sound in Mrs. Westbrook's ears.

"Have you ever met this poor fellow you are so severe upon—been introduced

to him, I mean? No, I thought not. Well, then, you must come and meet him some day at dinner. He is really charming, and he sings divinely!"

"He has sung himself into your good graces, Queenie, that is plain enough," said Percival, crossly; and with that parting shot, he abruptly changed the conversation.

Two days later the invitation was sent, and the unconscious rivals met. The dinner-party was small but well chosen, but Mrs. Westbrook had taken care not to ask anyone with whom Saville would have too much in common. She wished, if possible, to make him feel the want of her undivided attention, for when, as hitherto, the Forresters were the only other guests, they were still too much taken up with each other to feel neglected when Cecilia devoted herself to Saville.

She was civil and agreeable, as a hostess

should be, on this occasion also; but all her graceful little coqueties were given to Percival for the purpose of exciting the jealousy of the man whom she longed to pique into loving her, if she could not win his heart by any other means.

But, whether she talked to him, or left him to moon alone over the piano, now playing a brilliant sonata, now singing some gay love-song from an opera, or a pathetic ballad of his own composition, it was all the same. He was not jealous when he saw her plainly encourage Percival to lean over the back of her chair, and therefore it was impossible for him to show what he did not feel.

“I suppose she means to marry him,” he thought, as he saw Percival bend lower and lower, until his face almost touched Cecilia’s hair. “Well, I do not envy him, although she is so handsome and so rich. It would set me mad to see a fellow like that hang-

ing over her if I loved her ; and if she does not care for him, how can she let him do it ?”

You see, the simple-minded young fellow had lived more in Bohemia than in fashionable society, and in the former there is liberty without license, while in the latter license exists *sub rosa*, and liberty is altogether tabooed.

The season came to an end, and the duke, who was to adorn the fair brow of Mrs. Westbrook with strawberry leaves, did not appear ; but as not even by rumour was her name coupled with that of Edward Saville, Percival did not despair. She had not lost one iota of her popularity, and as she thoroughly understood the danger of making herself too cheap, the very people from whom she was most anxious to receive attention were never sure of being able to secure her as their guest.

More than once her approaching mar-

riage had been announced in a fashionable journal, but only to be contradicted on the best authority; so her final triumph for that season took place, not at St. James's, Piccadilly, but at "Goodwood," where she was seen by many admiring, and some envious eyes, upon the arm of a Royal Duke; and when Percival asked her if "he" had come at last, she smiled saucily, and said, "Perhaps."

CHAPTER IV.

THE close of the London season was also the close of Lady Olivia's long watch by the sick-bed of the unhappy woman, the mother of Leda Fortescue, who had been deserted by all the world. It had been a trying period to the kind-hearted Lady Olivia, but she had borne it bravely and unselfishly; but still she could not help feeling glad when she was at last able to write to say that she hoped to be in England within a given time, adding the pleasure she felt at the prospect of meeting her new sister at Beauwood Chase.

In the perfect and unbroken happiness

of the first months of her marriage, Helen had almost forgotten her dread of the meeting between her husband's sister and herself. But now that it was not only inevitable, but almost at hand, the wretchedness which she had endured at the bare idea of what might happen when she was recognised by Lady Olivia, came back with overwhelming force. She was so unspeakably, so perfectly happy with her husband, that it now seemed doubly hard to think that, ere long, she might see the love light in his eyes change to anger and suspicion, and hear the voice which had never addressed her except in tender or loving words, grow cold and stern.

It was too hard ; for if marriage had taught her that her husband was only mortal after all, that he had faults and failings which brought him down to the level of his fellow-men, still he was as nearly perfect in her loving eyes as it was possible

for man to be, and the bare idea of estrangement from him was agony.

To Lord Forrester, who had never run away with or from anyone, and who longed to introduce his beautiful wife to the sister who had been as a mother to him, the coming of Lady Olivia gave unmixed pleasure, and he hurried on the departure from London, in order that he and Helen might be quite settled at Beauwood before she came. The only drawback to his pleasure was the fact that Lady Olivia had said that her health would not allow her to spend the winter, or more than part of the autumn, in England.

Marriage, which is almost universally looked upon as a ruthless dispeller of illusions, had made Helen far more attractive and loveable to the husband than she had been to the lover. It could scarcely have been otherwise when, in her, Lord Forrester had found, not only a sweet and docile

temper, but a mind only too willing to put itself under the guidance of his, and thoughts and opinions which were exactly in accordance with his own, for the best reason in the world that they were not original, but simply a reflex. If he had declared—and he was by nature somewhat dogmatic—that the sky was green instead of blue, Helen would have followed his lead without a murmur ; and thus, if by-and-by it came to pass that the unfortunate escapade of her girlhood reached his ears, it was but too probable that she would condemn herself in proportion to the severity of his judgment upon her.

Lord Forrester could not help noticing the nervous excitement with which Helen looked forward to the arrival of her sister-in-law, but he put it down to her anxiety to make a good impression, and he tried by every means in his power to put her at her ease. When the dreaded day at last came,

despair seemed to restore poor Helen's courage.

"It must have come some time," she thought, "and better now, perhaps, than by-and-by. Oh! if I could but hope that she had forgotten me."

The feeling that it was hopeless to struggle against her fate, and that it would be as well to let the worst that was in store for her happen at once, induced Helen to put on that day a silk dress of the same shade of blue which she had worn on the day of her elopement. It was also her husband's favourite colour; but as she surveyed herself when her maid had left her, she had to acknowledge that she did not look as she had looked then. The slight figure had filled out, and she had lost all the girlish timidity of manner which had attracted Percival by its novelty, and which had made her such an easy victim to his blandishments. She

could not recognise in herself the foolish girl who cried like a baby when he had seemed unkind to her, and who had thought it was such a wonderful achievement to run away to be married.

She knew far better now than she had known when she made the appeal to Lady Olivia for protection the terrible danger she had escaped, and she was deeply and humbly thankful for her preservation, and the wretchedness of the past, and the perfect happiness of the present, were but too plainly visible to her mind when she saw herself dressed in the blue silk with which she meant to test Lady Olivia's memory. But she fervently wished that she had been less foolhardy, when she heard the carriage drive up to the door, and knew that the fatal moment was at hand. Lord Forrester had gone to the station to meet the traveller, and he presently led her into the room where poor Helen was waiting to receive her.

There was a very tender and loving embrace on Lady Olivia's side, and when she felt the quiver that shook the young wife from head to foot, she said kindly,

"I have so longed to meet you, dear—so longed to thank you for making Arthur happy."

Then the inevitable moment came when the two women had to stand apart and look at each other; the light was full upon Helen, but she did not flinch or change colour. For a moment Lady Olivia stared at her with a puzzled expression, then, like a flash, came recognition, and it was only by a strong effort that she kept back the exclamation of surprise and dismay that rose to her lips.

Helen saw that she was known, and again her courage rose to meet the trial she saw before her. There was but one thing to be done—she must make an appeal to Lady Olivia to be merciful, and to

spare her. She could see that the marriage was a happy one, and surely, the poor wife thought, it would be little short of cruelty on her part to sow the seeds of disunion.

A sudden chill fell upon the little party. Lady Olivia turned abruptly from her sister-in-law, and began to ask unnecessary questions about her luggage—had such a box been seen?—was Lord Forrester sure it had not been left behind at the station? Helen gave her time to recover her composure completely, and then proposed to take her to her room.

In perfect silence they went upstairs, and along sundry corridors, and not a word was said until, on some pretext, Lady Olivia sent Dickens away, to see whom had been a fresh and unexpected shock to poor Helen. She had entirely forgotten that the maid, as well as the mistress, knew who she was.

When the door was shut, and the sound of the woman's footsteps had died away, Lady Olivia caught Helen's hand, and looking almost piteously into her face, whispered—

“Tell me that I am deceived by a likeness—you are not *that* girl?”

“You are not deceived,” Lady Forrester answered. “Helen Calvert was the girl you were so kind to when she wanted a friend.”

“My brother's wife! Oh! if I had but known it!” and releasing Helen's hand, Lady Olivia turned away quickly, too really kind-hearted to let the girl see the anguish that she felt was written upon her face. But, after a few moments, anger at what she looked upon as double-dealing in Helen mastered her, and she turned again almost fiercely towards her.

“I need not ask,” she said, “if you have told Arthur your story, for had he

known it, he would never have written about you to me as he has done. Why were you not honest enough to tell him the truth?"

"Because I loved him too dearly to lose him," answered poor Helen simply, "and because I knew that, foolish as I had been, I was not unworthy to be his wife. Why should my whole life be blighted by one unfortunate mistake?"

She had unconsciously used the right argument to sway her companion. Lady Olivia had for years upheld the opinion that women were too hardly dealt with, but when the woman in fault was the wife of her idolized brother, she felt inclined to visit an act of folly with the punishment meted out by others to a social sin.

"Mistake!" she repeated, catching at the word. "Ah! if it were only a mistake! I hardly thought about what you told me that night. I saw you were young, pretty,

and in trouble, but how can I tell that you did not deceive me, that you had not been longer away from home than you said, and that—" She stopped short, angry, excited, and suspicious as she was, she could not, with her eyes fixed upon that pure young face, put her thought into words.

"I am not angry," Helen said gently, taking it for granted that Lady Olivia expected her to break out into a vehement defence of herself. "You have every right to suspect me, and I think you are about the only woman in the world who would not have doubted me at the time. I know better now than I did then the position I was in, and how severely women are judged, but I am ready to swear to you, if you like, that I told you the truth that night. Oh! Lady Olivia," and she threw herself on her knees beside the old lady's chair, "do not turn from me now, and be-

lieve me that dearly, passionately as I loved your brother, had there been any reason, known only to myself and to—to the man who deceived me so cruelly, to unfit me to be a true wife, I—I—” Here she utterly broke down and sobbed bitterly.

“Poor child!” said Lady Olivia tenderly. “I have been too hard upon you, but when I saw you here, in my mother’s place, and Arthur’s wife, I could not control myself. I wonder it never occurred to me that you might be the girl I sent home that night. I remember being so glad that he had not seen you.”

“If he had,” and Lady Forrester smiled faintly, “he would not have married me, and you would have been spared the misery of seeing me here.”

“Child, you do not know the world as I do,” Lady Olivia answered, “or you would not blame me for being suspicious of you. Every day girls ensnare men with their

beauty, and then marry their victims for the sake of position or for money. How could I tell that you were not such a one? Some women marry in order to have more liberty, and you might have grown tired of restraint."

"Alas!" said Helen, "I see it will be years before you believe in me; but I suppose I cannot hope to escape all the consequences of that mad act of mine."

There was something very like despair in her voice, and her sweet face was very sad.

Lady Olivia, always impulsive and outspoken, put her arms round the girl's neck and kissed her warmly.

"I do believe you," she said, "for no sham affection on the part of the woman he loved would have satisfied my brother's exacting nature. But now, remember this, having kept this secret from him so far, you must keep it always. His disappoint-

ment, and the distrust consequent upon that disappointment, would be as deep as his love has been strong. I believe that had he heard of your elopement with— with——”

“Captain Percival,” murmured Helen, very low.

“He would have broken off the marriage even if, in doing so, he had broken his own heart. Ah yes, my dear, I see what you think; you fancy that he loved you too well to give you up, but I know him better than you do. You have never seen him roused into obstinacy, and bent upon doing what he thought was right in defiance of feeling.”

Helen turned very pale.

“What am I to do?” she said. “I can trust you now, but there is your maid; she knows me.”

“And she has probably known all along who it was Arthur was going to

marry ; but we need not be afraid of her ; she will not betray us." She had already made Helen's cause her own. " I own I was very angry, and very much disappointed at first, but I cannot look at you and doubt your truth."

"Then I am safe!" cried Helen joyfully ; "I had made up my mind to bear the worst when I heard you were coming home."

"Poor darling!" and Lady Olivia kissed her again. "But now tell me," she added abruptly, "does your sister, Mrs. Westbrook, know anything of this? She and Captain Percival are great friends, Arthur has told me. I do not like him, and I may tell you now that I always suspected him, for Arthur saw him at the hotel that evening."

"How strange that we should all have been there together!" cried Helen, greatly interested. "Do tell me about it. I so

often wanted to know what happened after I went away."

"Not anything then that I know of," answered Lady Olivia, drily. She could believe thoroughly in her young sister-in-law when she had made up her mind to do so, but she was not going to encourage her curiosity upon a subject which had far better be forgotten as soon as possible. "Your friend Captain Percival is too much a man of the world to go about telling everyone that a young lady who had been idiotic enough to run away with him was sensible enough to go away without him. I am not afraid of him, but you must forgive me for saying that I am afraid of your sister."

"Of Cecilia? Why?" asked Helen in surprise.

"I can give you a child's reason only: because I am," replied Lady Olivia. "I feel sure that it would be unsafe to confide in her."

"Safe or unsafe," replied Helen, a little hurt on her sister's account, and yet still not able to forget all that happened just before Lord Forrester's proposal, "she does not know of my elopement unless Captain Percival has told her."

"Oh! he will not tell her, I think. I suppose he wants to marry her; he has been looking out for money and beauty for years. You had enough of one, but not enough of the other to tempt him."

"Oh, pray do not talk about him any more!" cried Helen imploringly. "It is hard enough upon me to have to meet and be civil to him sometimes, and I little thought that what I did that day would so often rise up in judgment against me. I often wonder if I had done some really good and sensible thing would it haunt me every hour of my life as my folly has done?"

"Let us hope; then, that the haunting is at an end for ever," said Lady Olivia; "but if trouble should come, remember I believe in you, and that I am ready to stand by you until the very last. And now I must ring for Dickens, to let her unpack, and get me ready for dinner; and, if I am not mistaken, Arthur is prowling about somewhere not very far off, wondering why I am keeping you away from him all this time."

Helen flew downstairs with a light heart, and a mind at ease, to meet her husband.

"Your sister is the dearest old lady in the world!" she cried, enthusiastically. "I was so afraid she would not like me!"

"As if anyone, old or young, could dislike my Helen!" interrupted the fond husband. And then, with a little sigh of pain at the thought of what her fate would have

been had Lady Olivia been less kind, Lady Forrester resolutely shut out the past from her mind, she hoped for ever.

CHAPTER V.

THERE was great excitement, and some surprise, in the autumn of that same year, amongst Edward Saville's friends, when it was known that a play of his had been accepted by the manager of the — Theatre, and put into rehearsal, in order that it might be the opening piece of the winter season.

Perhaps Saville himself was even more surprised at his success than were any of his admirers, for he had not thoroughly believed in his power to produce a really good work, and he had been so desultory in his efforts to produce any work more elaborate than love lyrics, and bright little

tales for Magazines, that when the plot of his play began first to shape itself out clearly in his own mind, and then to grow in interest until he could not help working at it, and putting out all his strength, he more than once stopped to ask himself what had inspired him ?

It was not the "unknown" whom he had so vainly tried to make the known. Was it, then, the beautiful Mrs. Westbrook, who had taken so much interest in him, and who had always been so very kind ? He had lost sight of her since the close of the season, and while he was working for five and six hours every day, during the hot August weather, he did not even know where she was.

But his inspiration had certainly not come from her, for he could not remember that she had ever shown sympathy enough for his literary tastes to incite him to steady work, and he knew, by a sort of instinct,

that it would not increase her liking for him to know that he was the author of the most successful play ever produced. She was rich enough to be eccentric, had she pleased, but she walked steadily in the ranks of the Philistines of the highest caste, and on many occasions she had tried to impress upon Saville that it would show more wisdom on his part to make some use of his aristocratic relations, in order to obtain employment, rather than to spend his life amongst the Bohemian tribe of authors and artists in whom his soul delighted.

“Yes,” he used to say, “you would like me to spend my days playing at work in one of the Government offices, and to be a member of the Carlton, or some such swell Club, but I am much more at home at the Garrick, or I am even low enough to prefer a much less august circle of Bohemians, of whom I am sure no one west of Charing Cross has ever heard.”

Mrs. Westbrook was out of town during the whole of the autumn, and even up to Christmas, and during those months, which proved so eventful to the man she loved, she had never heard of or from him ; but when she read the announcement that his play was to appear early in November, she was tempted to throw up some of her engagements and to go up to town to see the first performance. Could she have guessed the influence which that first performance was fated to have upon Saville's life, and, through him, upon her own, she would perhaps have felt more interest in it.

The very day he heard that his piece had been accepted, Saville rushed away from town, and he was wandering about, on foot, through Devon and Cornwall, while the rehearsals were going on vigorously at the — Theatre. There was a good deal of excitement amongst the company, for it was feared that the actress who

was to play the part of the heroine would be obliged to give up before the opening night, her health was so delicate. There were many secret surmises as to her successor, and by tacit consent—for her name was not openly mentioned—the place was given to Leda Fortescue.

She had been cast for the part of an old grandmother in Saville's piece, but she had had so little to learn, that for mere pleasure she had mastered the part of Gertrude, the heroine, as well, and many a time, as she had stood looking on from the wings during rehearsal, she had longed to dash forward to take the place of the "leading lady," who was a very pretty, but, owing to her delicacy, a somewhat spiritless actress. No one suspected that Leda knew the author of the piece, nor how eagerly she used to look about every day expecting to see him at rehearsal, but she was always disappointed, and then in her

own little sitting-room she used to go through the part of Gertrude (which might have been written for her, it suited her so well), and throw her whole heart into the portrayal of a gentle but high-spirited girl, who was described as having given her heart to a man who felt for her pity only, but who found out at last that the proud yet devoted woman whose heart he had all but broken, was the only woman in the world for him.

“Oh! how I wish I could play it before him!” cried Leda, as day after day she went through her solitary performance. “How surprised he would be!”

There was to be a dress rehearsal on the morning of the day that the piece was to be performed for the first time, and Leda went to the theatre to take her insignificant part of the grandmother. She was half an hour too soon, and as she sat in the green-room, waiting until it was time to

dress, she was surprised to get a message from the stage-manager. He was with Miss ——, the leading lady, in her dressing-room, and he wanted to see Miss Stanley at once.

On going into the dressing-room, Leda was surprised to see the actress, not yet dressed for her part, lying upon a sofa, while the stage-manager was walking up and down in evident bewilderment. Miss —— called Leda to her side at once.

“We are in difficulties,” she said, “and I think you can help us. I am much too ill to think of appearing to-night as Gertrude—in fact, my doctor says I have injured myself by not giving up long ago. Do you think you could undertake the part at short notice? The manager says he might contrive to postpone the performance until to-morrow or even next day. You can have all my dresses, you know. We are about the same height and size.”

Leda's pale face coloured high with excitement, but she was ashamed of her own good fortune when she remembered that it was gained by the suffering of one who had always been kind to her.

"I know the part perfectly this moment," she answered, "so the play need not be put off on my account."

"You don't say so?" cried the manager. "Then, if you can appear, you will save us several hundred pounds. You must dress at once for the rehearsal, and then, if you want a little more study, we must give you another day or two; but appear to-night, if you can, and then study afterwards."

He bustled off in great delight, and left the two girls together. Leda began to dress at once under the direction of her companion.

"You must not think I am unfeeling," she said, as she put on the pretty walking

costume in which Gertrude makes her first appearance. "I am very, very sorry you are so ill, but I have been longing for an opportunity to show that I can do something better than waiting-maids and old women."

"You have always been very pains-taking and good-natured," replied the woman she was about to supplant. "It would have been horribly mean and shabby if you had tried to get my place by any underhand means while I was still able to fill it; but now I have had my day, and I hope you are going to have yours. Do your very best, and I am sure you will succeed."

The injunction to do her best was not needed. Leda played with such dash and spirit, she was so perfectly at home in the part, and she had by study so made the best of even weak and trivial points, that she surprised not only the stage-manager, but herself. A perfect storm of applause

from her colleagues followed the fall of the curtain, and Leda was led away, trembling with excitement and pleasure, by the manager to his private room.

“Play to-night as you have done just now,” he said, “and Miss ——’s place is yours! What is the reason you did not let me know what you could do before?”

Evening came, the doors were open, and the house was filling fast. Leda was alone in Miss ——’s dressing-room, and the only sign of excitement visible about her was in the increased lustre of her beautiful eyes.

“I wonder if he is here,” she thought, “and if he will know me? But I look so different in Gertrude’s pretty clothes.”

Saville was in a private box, to see the first performance of his play. On his arrival at the theatre he had heard, with considerable disappointment, that Miss —— was too ill to appear, and that the part of Gertrude had been confided to Miss For-

tescue. It had been arranged, for the sake of novelty, which always attracts the public, that Leda should appear in the new part under her own name.

It was quite in vain for the manager to assure him that it could not have been confided to better hands, he had made up his mind that the whole affair would be a *fiasco*, and he could not be persuaded to the contrary; he had never been thoroughly satisfied with Miss —— as an actress, and he took it for granted that Miss Fortescue's reading of *her* parts would be still less satisfactory, so he was able to wait with the utmost patience for her appearance.

But the moment she came on, advancing, as is usual with the principal characters in a play, from the back of the stage, he was struck and pleased by the marvellous ease and grace of her movements; then, as she came forward into the full blaze of the footlights, he started up and almost cried

out in the excess of his surprise and pleasure ; the unknown, the "maiden with the soft eyes full of fancies," who had filled his thoughts, if not his heart, for two years, was before him at last ! Scarcely conscious of what was going on about him, he watched the progress of his piece ; he heard the applause which echoed through the house ; he rose and bowed in reply to the vociferous shouts for the author, but every thought was centered upon Leda. Did she see him, or rather did she recognize him ; but of course she did, for she had known his name since the day he had taken the ticket for her at the Westminster station.

He thought the last act, beyond measure, long and wearisome, although it contained Gertrude's best scene. An outburst of hearty applause greeted her when, the last misunderstanding between her and her lover having been cleared away, she

threw herself sobbing on his breast ! the acting was, if possible, too good.

“Confound that fellow !” thought Saville. “I must rewrite the end of that scene, it is too affectionate ; I cannot have her kissed like that every night.” Then the curtain fell. He did not wait to see Leda led out to be congratulated by the excited audience, but hurried away behind the scenes.

As he came into the green-room by one door she entered by another. She saw him coming towards her, and she went forward to meet him at once.

“I have come to thank you,” he said. The enthusiastic speeches he had prepared slipped out of his mind, and he could get out only a few common-place words.

“Yes, you two ought to know one another !” cried the cheery voice of the stage-manager. He was radiant at the success of the piece. “Did I not tell

you, Saville, that we had found a first-rate Gertrude? and in my opinion a part, however well it may read, is not a part at all until it has been played as Miss Fortescue played to-night. But let me introduce you," and the young man and the girl actually shook hands in the most prosaic and common-place manner.

It was impossible for him to talk to her with all those jabbering people about her. Saville felt a sudden and almost unaccountable dislike to the green-room and its inhabitants, and it grieved him to think that *she* should spend so much of her time there.

"You will tell me where you live now, and let me see you home, will you not?" he said, with an amount of eagerness in his voice which caught Leda's ear at once. "I have so much to say to you about the play, you know, pray do not refuse."

"I do not think I can," she answered,

hesitating. "It is a long way, and I generally go in an omnibus, but after to-night perhaps I might have a cab." She was thinking of the increase to her salary.

"Then let me get a cab for you," he went on, and before she could refuse he held out his arm.

"Oh, I have to dress," she said, drawing back ; "but I can do it so quickly, if you do not mind waiting." She slipped away from him, and came back in about ten minutes transformed from the stylish-looking heroine of the drama into the simply-dressed and quaker-like-looking girl whom he had met two years before.

She seemed much more familiar to him in that guise, but it gave him a fresh stab of pain and disappointment to notice that she had been able to wash all the brilliant colour off her cheeks. He did not realize that it was paint until it was gone. He was delighted to meet her again, but sorry

to find her on the stage. Still she could not be one of those fast girls who take to the profession because it gives them a fair field for coquetry and display, or she would not have avoided him so pointedly after their first chance meeting.

He put her into her cab, and felt both glad and sorry that she was firm in her refusal not to let him accompany her to her home ; but he got her address, and made an arrangement to call upon her the next day, in order to talk over the alterations which he thought would improve his play. He was bent upon re-writing the reconciliation scene at the end, which was now too demonstrative to please him.

He was punctual to the hour named by Leda for his visit, and he brought with him an offering of some choice flowers from Covent Garden—an expensive luxury in November—which he was glad to see gave her intense pleasure. He thought he

had never seen so pretty or so dainty a little sitting-room, "home-like" was what he secretly called it in his enthusiasm, and he thought what a paradise it would be if he could but share just such a home with her. Everything, from the little cottage piano, the few pictures, principally photographic copies of well-known works, the little work-table at which Leda was sitting when he came in, gave evidence of refined and cultivated taste.

To admit that Leda had that morning taken some extra pains in the arrangement of her beautiful hair, and with her dress generally, is only to admit that she was a thorough woman, and young; and with a flush of excitement on her usually pale face, she looked so very charming that Saville wondered why he had not always thought of her as beautiful; sweet and attractive she had always seemed in his memory, but now he felt that she was beautiful as well.

He was by no means the brilliant, agreeable, and light-hearted young fellow, full of fun and fancy, who showed to so much advantage in Mrs. Westbrook's drawing-room. Before one woman he could give full play to his humour, before the other he was at first shy, and almost awkward. "What a stupid fool she must think I am," he said to himself; but Leda did not think anything of the kind. She was wondering what Lady Olivia—who was by that time on her way to Nice for the winter and spring—would say when she heard what had happened, and thinking how very bad the likeness she had made of him from memory had been.

When they began to discuss the proposed alterations in the play, Saville became more like himself. He had intended to make them merely an excuse for his visit, but she was so much in earnest that he had to give his mind to the subject. Then he got

interested and excited, especially about that objectionable last scene, which she defended with so much animation that he got sulky and jealous, and declared his belief that "all women liked that sort of thing!"

"But," said Leda, who looked at the question entirely from an artistic point of view, "surely, if you were in love with a woman yourself, and if you had misunderstood her, and the nature of your own feelings, for a long time, and if you then suddenly found out the truth, surely, I say, you would give her a kiss?"

"But not with five or six hundred people grinning and staring at me through opera glasses!" growled Saville, who longed to tell her that if any other woman had played the part the embrace would not have disturbed him in the least.

"But you were writing for those five or six hundred people," Leda persisted, "and feeling the truth of the situation when you

wrote, you put in the kiss ! You cannot think that it would be enough for Frank to shake hands with Gertrude at that moment."

"I think that is just what he ought to do," cried Saville, delighted with the idea.

"Then I fear I must give up the part, for I cannot consent to spoil it," answered the enthusiastic young actress. "Please, see it once more before you decide," she added pleadingly. "Perhaps we did not do it well. I think in some things Mr. ——" —mentioning the name of the actor who had played with her—"is rather a stick. He is very good-natured, suppose I give him a hint to be a little more natural?"

"I have no doubt he will take it most kindly!" replied Saville, in a tone of such bitter satire that Leda glanced at him in surprise. Her profession and her natural quickness had given her a keen insight into the thoughts of others, and in an

instant she saw that Saville's objections were personal and not artistic.

Of course, liking him as she did, the discovery was by no means disagreeable to her; but it kept her from any further argument upon the point. The scene, however, was not rewritten, but never again did she throw herself into the arms of her stage lover with the happy unconsciousness of the first night.

CHAPTER VI.

THE day of his first visit was the beginning of a new and happy life to Saville and Leda Fortescue. He had fallen desperately in love, but he did not, as yet, dare to tell her so openly, for he feared to spoil the happy freedom of their intercourse. But he told her how he had thought about her during the two years which had passed since their first meeting, and he sang the songs which he had written to her, and Leda listened and understood.

But early in December, Saville's piece was withdrawn for a time, to make room for the pantomime, and Leda went to Brighton for

a holiday of some weeks, and she had no sooner gone than her lover found he could not live without her. Their friendship was very delightful, but at its best it was an unsatisfactory and unnatural state of things; so he followed her from London, and asked her to be his wife.

"I know you love me," he said, "and it will not be my fault if you are not happy."

"How do you know?" she had asked, half vexed to think that she had not been more reserved.

They were sitting together on the sunny beach, sheltered by an up-turned boat. Saville's arm was round her, and he tried to answer her question with a kiss.

"I thought you did not approve of love-making in public," she said, resisting him successfully, and reminding him of his objections to the end of his own play.

"As if anyone could compare this de-

lightful little nook to the stage," he answered. "And you know very well that I did not object to kissing in the abstract."

"No, I believe the objection was that it was badly done," said Leda demurely, "but I never had courage enough to suggest that Mr. —, in the capacity of Frank, might put a little more vigour into his part just at that point."

"You are laughing at me, you little tease," said Saville, drawing her closer, "but never mind, we are not going to spend the rest of our lives under this old boat, and then——"

"Oh, Edward!" she whispered, answering his unspoken words, "is it really true that you love me?"

"Perhaps," he said, wishing to punish her for having refused his kiss. "Perhaps I am like your friend Frank, in the first part of the play: going to marry you out

of pity, because I know how much you care for me."

A look of intense pain passed over her face as he said the jesting words.

"If that were true there would be no more happiness for me in this world," she answered very low, "and I think it would kill me! Oh, I wish you had not said it even in jest, Edward," she added, turning her beautiful eyes, which were clouded with tears, upon his face; "you do not know how often I have reproached myself for not being better able to hide what I felt for you, and it seems so strange that you should choose me, when you might marry one in your own position."

"My own position!" echoed Saville laughing. "Why, Leda, you foolish child, that I have not a position has all my life been a trouble to my friends. I am an ingrained Bohemian, and am bored to death

when I am obliged to go into society." That was not quite true, as we know; he had never yet felt bored, or out of his element, at Rutland Gate.

"And yet you want me to give up my profession, the profession I love, and become an idle fine lady."

"If you love your profession, as you call it, better than you love me, Leda, I have no more to say; but I want you to be my friend and companion as well as my wife, darling, and not to be at the beck and call of others."

"I almost wish we had not met for a few years to come until I had made my fortune," she said.

"Yes, until your complexion was ruined with paint, and your bright eyes dimmed with gaslight; but perhaps you think I might love you better if you were rich, is that it?" said Saville. "You think a large fortune would reconcile me to my hard

fate in being obliged to marry you out of pity."

"Oh, no, no!" she answered, with the same piteous expression in her eyes. "You must not say that! the idea will haunt me, and make me miserable."

"Let us marry at once, then," said Saville, "I may then, perhaps, be able to make you understand——" but at that moment footsteps were heard upon the shingle close by, and their retreat was invaded. Leda started up, Saville followed her, and they went up together to the crowded promenade along which they had to pass to reach Leda's lodgings.

It was the gayest hour of the short, winter afternoon; crowds of ladies and gentlemen and children were walking up and down, the shops were brilliant, and the whole scene was bright and animated.

Leda, in her quiet but handsome dress¹ attracted no small amount of attention as

she went along by Saville's side. She had refused to take his arm although he had urged her to do so ; but he had no eyes for anyone else, and he kept his face turned towards her as he talked, and he took no notice whatever of the gay troops as they passed and repassed ; he did not even see, as Leda did, that he and she were frequently pointed out as author and actress.

"Look there !" she said, at last. "What a beautiful woman ! And she knows you, Edward. She is bowing."

Saville collected himself with an effort. In spirit he had been away with Leda in that enchanted island upon which he longed to dwell ; in the flesh he was upon the promenade at Brighton, and face to face with Mrs. Westbrook ! She was walking with her friends, the Vane-Trevors, who always spent part of the winter at Brighton.

She and Saville had not met for months, and it was only by a great effort that she was able to hide the pleasure it gave her to see him again. He was looking so well, and so handsome too ; but who was that pale-faced girl with whom he was walking ?

There was the slight confusion which always ensues when people meet unexpectedly, and do not know whether they are to stop and speak, or to walk on with an exchange of bows. Mrs. Westbrook half stopped, then moved on again, then finally fell back from her friends ; Saville, of course, stopped too, and Leda went slowly on.

The conversation was soon over. Mrs. Westbrook heard that Saville had come from town early that morning ; she gave him the name of her hotel, then they shook hands and parted.

“ Who is that lovely creature ? ” asked

Leda. "I never saw such a face."

"Yes, she is pretty," said Saville, carelessly. "She is a great friend of mine; but we have not met for ages."

"Not married, I suppose?"

"She is a widow, a Mrs. Westbrook, and she has at least £30,000 a-year."

"A widow—rich—and a *great* friend of yours, Edward!" Leda spoke slowly, and smiled at him faintly. "How is it then——"

"I believe all you women are the same," interrupted Saville, half inclined to be angry. "You never hear a man asking the girl who has accepted him why she has not chosen some other fellow."

"Because you men are so well satisfied with yourselves that the idea never occurs to you," answered Leda, laughing, as she slipped her hand within Saville's arm. They were now in a less crowded part of the public walk.

The action pleased him, and his momentary anger vanished.

"No, Leda," he said fondly; "but I believe men are more really trustful than women. You are always gauging and measuring your lover's feelings to see how deep they are, and how wide."

"And yet," said Leda, "when I saw that beautiful woman, and heard that she was a friend of yours, and when I saw by her face that she was very—*very* glad to see you, I thought—oh! forgive me, Edward, if I pain you—that it was almost impossible for you to have helped loving her."

They were then in Leda's little sitting-room, and she was standing before him, holding the lappels of his coat with her little hands.

"And you think she was glad to see me? Well, I could forgive you a heavier sin than the sin of fancying that the man you loved was appreciated by others, my sweet one," he answered lightly.

It was not exactly the answer she had expected, and yet she could not have defined the want it had to her. But when, having watched her changeful face in silence for a few moments, knowing that she was his, and that he could prolong his happiness indefinitely, Saville suddenly clasped her in her arms, and took his first kiss from her lips, she gave herself up to the delight of feeling that she was to be his, his very own, for evermore.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Westbrook and her companions walked on to their hotel.

"Who is that girl with Mr. Saville?" asked Mrs. Trevor. "I seem to know her face, or rather her hair, quite well."

"Of course you do," replied her husband. "We saw her not a fortnight ago playing Gertrude in his piece at the — Theatre. What a handsome creature she is! Looks better off the stage than on, I think."

"Do you call her handsome?" cried Mrs. Westbrook. "I never could admire that coloured hair; and such a sallow skin!"

"Oh! I think she's pretty enough," said Mrs. Trevor, to whom Saville was almost a stranger, and therefore the beauty or ugliness of the girl he was in company with was a matter of indifference to her. "I wish he had introduced her to us. It would be such fun to know an actress."

Mr. Trevor, who had the honour of knowing several actresses, said, "Nonsense, my dear!" And so the subject dropped.

The next morning Mrs. Westbrook refused to go and ride with her friends. She hoped that Saville would call in the forenoon, and she wanted to see him alone. As she had anticipated, he came early, and he was in the wildest spirits, for he had just won a promise from Leda to give up

the stage, and to marry him early in the new year.

"You have become a great man since we parted," Cecilia said, and she held his hand while she spoke. "Got up to find yourself famous, and the rest of it. Why did you not read your play for me as you wrote it? But I suppose you did not think my opinion upon a literary matter would be worth having."

"Or say rather that I had too high an opinion of your powers to run the risk of adverse criticism," replied Saville gaily. "If you had condemned my play, Mrs. Westbrook, its fate was sealed."

"The flattery is too gross for acceptance," she answered, laughing. "I cannot believe that you would have given up the chance of immortality out of deference to my poor opinion."

"If, in his intercourse with Mrs. Westbrook, a man loses *only* his chance of im-

mortality, he may look upon himself as fortunate," said Saville gallantly, as he raised the soft hand, which still lay in his, to his lips.

She could not reply. Although the words were spoken in the lightest *badinage*, they made her heart beat fast.

"You never came to see my play, did you?" he asked presently. "I think myself its success is entirely owing to the wonderful manner in which the part of the heroine is played——"

"By that girl you were walking with yesterday?" she interrupted, with a sharp ring in her voice.

"Yes, how did you know?" he answered, surprised. He was sitting on a sofa beside her, slightly leaning over on one elbow and playing with the tassel of the cushion which supported him. Mrs. Westbrook could not see his face without turning round a little and looking down.

"Mr. Trevor told me," she replied ; " he has seen her, is acquainted with her, I think. Actresses are common property, you know."

Saville's face flushed.

"I am sorry you have such a low opinion of them," he answered quietly, " and it is not true as regards Miss Fortescue. I was going to ask you to call upon her ; she is a gentlewoman by birth and education, and I think you would like her. She is going to leave the stage, too, I hope——"

"When she marries you, I suppose?" interrupted Mrs. Westbrook again. Her voice was as calm and sweet as ever, but to her dying hour she never forgot the bound her heart gave, or the sensation which immediately followed, as if a cord had been tightly drawn round it.

Saville sat up quickly, but she kept her face turned away from him.

"How did you know it?" he exclaimed

eagerly. "It is quite true; I came down from town yesterday to ask her, and she said yes."

"As a matter of course," replied his companion ironically, "women always say 'yes.'"

"Do they?" said Saville. "I never asked anyone before, so I cannot tell; but I am sure there are plenty of women in the world who would say 'no' to me. You, for instance, Mrs. Westbrook, if I had been audacious enough to ask you."

"Very likely," she answered, with well-assumed carelessness. "It is a trick of mine, I must acknowledge; but when I said 'all women' I mean women of that class. The aim of their lives is marriage."

"If you knew Leda Fortescue you would find that she was an exception," he said earnestly; "she is a woman any man might be proud to call wife. There now, you are laughing at me; you think all

lovers say that, but again I repeat, if you knew her! Will you not call upon her when I ask you as a great favour? The only lady friend she has is my cousin Lady Olivia Forrester, and she is never in England."

"That old lady seems to be the refuge of the destitute. How does she happen to know your Miss Fortescue?"

"Oh, I don't know exactly; it is a long story, and it would not interest you," answered Saville, who felt reluctant, he scarcely knew why, to tell the sad history of Leda's mother to Mrs. Westbrook. He had heard it all from the girl herself before she had consented to be his wife.

"Very likely," she said; "I am not much interested in the vagaries of my noble connections. But what is it you want me to do? bring this girl out and introduce her in society as the future Mrs. Edward Saville?"

“Well, I do not care very much about society, as you know,” he answered. “But there is a certain amount of stupid prejudice against the stage, and I do not want my wife to suffer from it; so I thought if you were kind to her,—you know you have always been so kind to me—that other people would take their cue from you.”

“But remember you are nearly related to my brother-in-law, and he is so particular, and then if this Miss Fortescue is not——”

“Oh, she is all right,” cried Saville. “Can you not trust me, Mrs. Westbrook? You know I am not capable of forcing an undesirable acquaintance upon you. Say you will be kind and friendly to her; it will make me so happy.”

He little knew the sacrifice he was asking with so much importunity, or the motive which at length induced Cecilia to acquiesce.

"I cannot refuse you," she said at last ;
"but remember, I am going to do it altogether for your sake."

"No, no," he said, "but because you have the kindest heart in the world."

"Yes, now you begin to flatter when you have gained your point ; but I am not going to admit kindness of heart in the matter. I am going to call upon this divinity of yours because you have bullied me into it, and because I am a little curious to know an actress, and also because I am afraid that you and she may get into mischief if there is no one to look after you."

"Having kept my senses under the intoxicating influence of your praises and your friendship, do you not think I may be trusted to act as becometh a sane man in any position?" he answered, with one of those smiles which made women tolerate his most saucy speeches.

“ Ah !” she said impulsively, “ there is a difference—you never *loved* me !”

Then she started up suddenly, declaring that she had an engagement ; but before she said good-bye she made Saville promise to come back to dinner.

CHAPTER VII.

IT pleased Saville to see that Leda showed no signs of jealousy when he told her that he had accepted Mrs. Westbrook's invitation. "I wish I could have got out of it," he had said. "A quiet evening with you here would be far—far more delightful, but she was so kind I could not refuse."

But although Leda's freedom from jealousy was satisfactory, her ready acquiescence in an arrangement which would take him away from her for so many hours had its drawbacks. But the truth was the practical side of Leda's character saw the difficulties with which she must learn to

contend during her engagement. She was totally unprotected, and she knew how unkind and suspicious the world was. She knew she could trust Saville most implicitly, but still the situation was full of danger and temptation, and for his own sake she determined to keep him away from her as much as possible, and she was glad to remember that, when she went to London, her evenings would be all spent at the theatre.

But she knew what she was giving up when—Saville having left her at six o'clock to dine with Mrs. Westbrook at seven—she prepared to spend several hours alone in her unhomelike lodgings. It had been so different the evening before, when she had been but a few hours his promised wife—he had been sitting at her feet, telling her his wild poetic fancies, and improvising songs in praise of her beauty, and she had listened almost in silence, for she

did not dare to let him see into the depths of her own pure heart. She was obliged to be calm and self-possessed, and to treat lightly and playfully all his extravagant demonstrations of affection.

She was very lonely without him that second evening; lonely and oppressed by those doubts which too often assail the mind of a loving and unselfish woman. Had he indeed done wisely in choosing her? would her love for him fill up every want in his life? and was it really the right thing for her to give up her profession at his bidding, and for his sake?

Suppose—such things too often happened, she knew—he were to become weary of her after a time, or separation became inevitable, what was her fate likely to be? The years she had been battling with the difficulties of her position in life had made Leda a degree too cautious and calculating. She was prone to look too far ahead, and

now that love had come to her she could not all at once give herself up without question to the will of another.

“He calls himself an ingrain Bohemian!” she said to herself, as she walked up and down her little room, and every now and then held up to the light the beautiful ring he had given her that morning. “But I believe, if I were to see him now, he is more at home in that lovely Mrs. Westbrook’s drawing-room than he has ever been when sharing my poor little suppers when the play is over. Little things, which do not shock me in the least, fidget him, and he often talks about people of whom I know nothing; and in spite of his protestations that poverty with me will be more bearable than riches with any other woman, I shrink from seeing him put to the test; and then if, after we marry, he is disappointed in me, what a miserable fate for him!”

She did not say "for me." She was a true woman, and had she been certain that it would be for Saville's happiness to break off the engagement, and to put an end for ever to all intercourse between them, she would have hidden herself from him in the farthest corner of the earth.

It was, perhaps, fortunate for her peace of mind that she had not the power of looking into Mrs. Westbrook's drawing-room that evening. She and Saville had not dined alone; but the Trevors had gone off to some public entertainment, and had left their friends *tête-à-tête*. Never before had Cecilia seemed to the man, whom she had tried by every art to captivate, so fascinating, or, as he expressed it to himself, so womanly. I believe, if she had known how to put on the gentle helplessness peculiar to so many of her sex, Saville would have fallen in love with her from the first hour of their acquaintance; but

she was always so brilliant, so daring, so unconventional in thought and word, if prudent in action, that, although dazzled, and full of admiration for her beauty, and not ungrateful for the extreme friendliness of her manner, he had never felt any desire to make her his wife.

But that night she was so different that he was more than once startled and almost frightened at the pleasure he felt in looking at her exquisite face, and in listening to her conversation.

At last he got up and threw back his shoulders, as if he were trying to throw off some glamour which oppressed him. "It is twelve o'clock; why do you not turn me out, Mrs. Westbrook?" he said. "Thank you for the pleasantest evening I have ever spent," he added, as he shook hands with her. "Even if I had come to you miserable instead of happy, you would have charmed away the evil spirit."

"I suppose I must be satisfied to play *that* part, and that only, throughout my life!" she answered bitterly. After all, he had come to her happy, and she had only helped him to spend a pleasant evening. She did not know how much the excitement of the moment had been urging him to say just before he had had self-command enough left to get up and bid her good night. He was puzzled and vexed at the disturbance in his mind. Was it possible that he could give a lover-like thought to any woman except his own dear Leda?

There had been a little talk about her during the evening, and Mrs. Westbrook had got her address, and had promised to call upon her when she went back to town; but, before the visit, she was to go to the — Theatre, to see Saville's play, escorted by the author himself.

She went back to Rutland Gate before Christmas, but Leda resisted all Saville's

entreaties to leave Brighton until her holiday was quite over. She was to re-appear as Gertrude in "For Love and Life" on Twelfth Night; then she was to play Mrs. Mildmay, in "Still Waters Run Deep," Lady Teazle in the "School for Scandal," and then, just before the close of her engagement at Easter, she was to appear again for her benefit, and for the last time as Gertrude.

Leda determined to remain in Brighton, because she knew it was impossible for Saville to stay there just then. She could not keep him away from her as long as he was at the hotel near her lodgings, and lonely as she was without him, it was in some respects a relief to her to know that he had left, and in her letters to pour out all her heart to him. He hated letter writing, but he sent her, every other day, some charming verses, or in a short note, written in furious haste, and with two, or

even sometimes three stamps upon it, to save the post, he would tell her that, if she did not leave Brighton at once, she would oblige him to come down with a priest and license to give him power over her for ever more.

But she kept to her resolve, and on the eleventh of January Saville met her at Victoria, and escorted her to her home in Church Street, Westminster. On the following evening she saw him in a private box, with Mrs. Westbrook, at the — Theatre, and never—so said her numerous admirers—had Miss Fortescue played with so much spirit.

Saville waited hungrily for Mrs. Westbrook's verdict.

"I am charmed with it," she said. "It is both clever and original. But that Leda of yours plays too well! If a woman who can act like that on the stage were a friend of mine, the idea would be always

in my head that she could not be real."

"Then," said Saville, to whom, as she intended, her words gave pain, "if you were in my place, when Leda says she cares for me, you would think she was acting."

"Ah! that is going too far," cried Cecilia, delighted to note the effect of her well-studied speech. "So much would depend upon her motive for acting, in that case! I must confess that, if she were about to improve her position very much by marrying, it would make me suspicious; but of course that is only my idea. She may be perfectly genuine, and she seemed so once or twice, when I have noticed her in the wings talking to that tall, good-looking man—you can see him now. Is he one of the company?"

"No, he is a rich City man, who has been stage-struck all of a sudden."

"And who admires Miss Fortescue very

much, too—anyone can see that. But I am not surprised. She looks very pretty in that white dress and her blue ribbons. That stage complexion is very becoming, too.”

“What a polite euphemism for paint,” said Saville laughing, and feeling rather angry, he scarcely knew why.

He wished he had not persuaded Mrs. Westbrook to come and see his play. Although she had praised it heartily enough, there was an impression on his mind that she thought the whole thing was weak and sentimental, and he wished that Leda had put on a little less paint and powder, and, above all, that she had not stood talking to that “City man” in the wings. He had promised to go back with Mrs. Westbrook to Rutland Gate, so he could not see Leda home, but as Cecilia wished to stay for the burlesque, he left her box for a few moments, and met Leda in the green-room.

"You surpassed yourself to-night, darling," he said, as he took her to the little brougham which she could now afford to hire for the evening. "Mrs. Westbrook was charmed, and she is going to call upon you very soon."

"Can I not leave you at the Garrick on my way?" Leda asked, when she had duly expressed her sense of Mrs. Westbrook's kindness.

But Saville explained that he had promised to join a party at supper at Rutland Gate.

"You see, darling, you are generally so anxious to send me away from you at this witching hour," he said, laughing, as he held her hand through the window of the carriage, "that, mindful of your hard-heartedness, I made an engagement."

"And quite right, too," she answered gaily enough. "Good night."

She was driven away, and he went back to Mrs. Westbrook.

A day or two later, Cecilia's handsome carriage and high-stepping horses came dashing into Church Street, and Cecilia herself, looking superb in her rich dress, was shown into the little room where Leda was sitting studying one of her new parts."

"I am such a very old friend of Edward Saville's that I cannot look upon you as a stranger," she said, taking Leda's hands in both her own and stooping to kiss her forehead.

She had been ready enough to declare that an actress so good as Leda could never be genuine, but from the moment she entered the girl's presence she was herself acting a part which she had not the slightest intention of giving up.

"He has told me about you," Leda answered. She did not say, "You are very kind," or, "I am glad to see you," and Mrs. Westbrook could not help acknow-

ledging that her manner was perfectly natural, and not very cordial.

"And now that I have made you out," Cecilia went on, "we must see a great deal of each other, must we not? When can you come and dine with me? A quiet party; people who have seen you, and who know Mr. Saville, of course."

Leda explained that she was engaged every evening at the theatre.

"But not on Sunday?" cried Cecilia. "Oh! yes, you can come to me on Sundays, and you could spend a day with me. Dine at any hour you like; and I can send you to the theatre."

Leda could not refuse, even if she had wished to do so, but she was very curious to see what the life of a woman of fashion was like, and whether the difference between the society in which she lived, and that frequented by Mrs. Westbrook, was real or imaginary. She totally failed to

discover any incongruity between herself and her elegant visitor, as they sat together talking about books and music, etc., at their first meeting, but she did not give Cecilia credit for the fund of superficial knowledge which she had taken so much trouble to acquire. She had a way of darting from subject to subject, interrupting herself, and occasionally forgetting what she had said a moment before, that was very confusing and irritating to the accurate and quiet-mannered Leda. But she was pleased, on the whole, and if Cecilia was a degree more flippant, and several degrees less refined than Leda had expected a Queen of beauty and fashion to be, she was certainly very kind and winning.

The want of refinement had struck Leda forcibly when, in talking about Saville, Mrs. Westbrook had said—

“Do you not find it rather awkward to

have him mooning about you constantly, dear? It is so hard to keep a lover in order. You know what I mean."

The girl had coloured up so painfully—she thought it was so unkind of her visitor to allude to her isolated position—that Cecilia saw at once what a mistake she had made.

"You must forgive me, my dear Miss Fortescue," she said. "I really forgot for the moment that I was speaking of Edward Saville, than whom there is not in the world a more chivalrous and honourable man."

She had begun her speech for a purpose, but the thought of her own unsought love for him came over her as she spoke, and the fervour of her tone struck Leda at once.

When she was alone again, but with her little room still redolent of some delicate perfume which had hung about Mrs. West-

brook, and which was ever after associated with her in Leda's mind, she thought again and again of the sudden change that had come over Cecilia when she had broken out into the sudden praise of Saville.

"What can it mean? Does she love him too?" said Leda to herself. "And if so, why does he come to me? She is a million times more lovely, she is rich, she could surround him with all the beauty in which his nature delights. Oh! if I could but know the truth!"

The dreadful idea that he was marrying her out of pity, or, more humiliating still, out of pique, came back to her, but was hastily thrust out of sight again. Surely she had often seen the light of love, as real and as passionate as her own, in those honest blue eyes?

CHAPTER VIII.

THE Sunday dinner-party, at which Leda Fortescue was to make her first appearance in good society, was by no means successful. The guests who were asked to meet her were the Vane-Trevors, and another young husband and wife, Mr. and Mrs. Granville-Egerton. Leda wondered if all the people in "high life" had two surnames.

Mrs. Granville-Egerton was a pretty and very rude little woman, spoiled by her husband and friends, and the wickedest flirt in England! She professed herself charmed to meet Miss Fortescue, and declared that it must be the "very nicest

thing" in the world to be an actress! "Such fun to have all the actors making love to one in the plays, you know; and then, if they happen to be serious—and, of course, they were one and all dying about Miss Fortescue—it gave them such nice opportunities!"

Leda listened in silent amazement. If she had heard such conversation amongst the lower class of actresses employed at the — Theatre, it would not have surprised her, but she had expected something higher in tone from a lady in good society.

Then, after dinner, when she made the fourth with the hostess and her friends in the drawing-room, her wonder increased every moment. She heard the dress, the equipages, the personal appearance, and the last questionable *bon mot* of some well-known queen of the *demi-monde* discussed and admired by her three companions with an amount of freedom and zest that fairly

disgusted the refined and pure-minded Leda. Then they passed on to their personal friends, all of whom seemed to the astonished listener to be chiefly remarkable for the skill with which they contrived to keep questionable adventures in the background.

“And I am in what is called ‘good society,’” Leda thought, half-inclined to smile at what seemed to her the singular inappropriateness of the adjective. She was obliged to own, however, that Mrs. Westbrook was more good-natured than her guests, and had always an extenuating word to say in favour of those with whom they were inclined to deal hardly.

“How are you getting on?” Saville whispered, as he bent over Leda at the table, where he found her sitting apart when he came in after dinner.

“Not very well,” she answered truthfully. “I am confused with the chatter

those people keep up—I do not mean Mrs. Westbrook, but her friends; it would be less fatiguing to me to learn a new part than to listen to them.”

“I wish Mrs. Westbrook had not asked them to meet you,” replied Saville, with anything but an amiable look at Mesdames Trevor and Egerton. “That little woman in pink is my aversion. I wonder Egerton does not lock her up. It must be downright penance to her to be here to-night without a man to flirt with.”

“What treason are you two plotting?” said Cecilia, joining them at the moment. “Confess now, Mr. Saville, has not Miss Fortescue been telling you that she thinks we have been rude to her? There she has been for the last hour poring over Doré’s Milton while we have been wickedly talking away the characters of our neighbours.”

“It would be very hard to take from

some people what they have never had," replied Saville, with just a glance at Mrs. Egerton.

"Come, come! no scandal about Queen Elizabeth, sir!" cried Cecilia. "I believe you are savage because she never tries to flirt with you."

"Ah! it takes two willing performers for every duet," returned Saville, in his most saucy manner.

Leda had gone back to her book. She felt quite as much out of her element when her lover and Mrs. Westbrook talked in that fashion as she had done before he came in.

"If those are the kind of people I must live amongst when I marry," she thought, when she found herself back again in her little room in Church Street, "I fear I shall often miss my poor good-natured friends at the theatre, who know nothing whatever of the manners and customs of

good society, Even *he* seems different, and that beautiful Mrs. Westbrook, how her voice changes and softens when she speaks to him, and yet she seems as if she really liked me and wanted to be kind to me."

The impression that Cecilia liked her for her own sake grew upon Leda as time went on. After the dinner-party at Rutland Gate, Mrs. Westbrook exerted all her powers of fascination to erase from the girl's mind the unfavourable impression which she saw plainly enough had been made.

"You must not judge me by the company I am obliged to keep sometimes," she had said playfully, a day or two after the dinner-party, as, having gone to Church Street for the purpose, she carried off Leda for a drive. "I suppose it would be more honest not to ask a woman like Mrs. Egerton to dine when I really do not like

her ; but she is in a very good set, and she has been very civil to me, so what can I do ? You will understand it all much better when you have lived a little longer in our world."

"It was not that I disliked her," said truthful Leda ; "but I had always fancied that people who lived in the best society were so polished and refined, and, I confess——"

"You were horrified to hear us telling each other anecdotes that would disgrace a fish-wife, is that it, my dear ? You are quite right. Women of the present day not only do naughty things, but talk about them among themselves. I think Mrs. Egerton has set the fashion ; but then she tells such absurd tales about herself that no one believes her."

That afternoon was the first of many pleasant *tête-à-tête* meetings between Mrs. Westbrook and Leda Fortescue, and before

very long, Leda was obliged to confess that Cecilia was as kind and fascinating as she was beautiful.

Several times she spent from Saturday until Monday with her new friend. Mrs. Westbrook would send her carriage to the theatre to bring Leda to Rutland Gate at the close of the afternoon performance, which was now habitual on Saturdays, and then the two ladies would spend Sunday quietly together. Even Saville would not be of the party, for he generally spent Sunday out of town.

During those weekly visits, Mrs. Westbrook used to become confidential with her guest, and give Leda to understand that there was some hidden sorrow in her heart, that made her miserable, beneath all the gaiety she was obliged to keep up before the world. Leda never exactly understood how the impression was conveyed ; but she could not shake off the idea which gradual-

ly took possession of her that in some way, either directly or indirectly, with his knowledge or without it, Saville was connected with this hidden grief.

“ I know I shall have to ask her some day what it all means,” Leda would say to herself, when she had puzzled over the question in solitude. “ Can it be possible that he was ever in love with her, and afraid to ask her to marry him because she was so rich ?”

She could not make up her mind to ask her lover to explain the mystery. If there had never been any confession of love between him and Mrs. Westbrook it would be unfair to her to let him know that she secretly cared for him, and if they had been acknowledged lovers in that past of which Leda knew so little, she felt it would be less painful to her to hear the truth from Mrs. Westbrook than to be obliged to listen to it from Saville’s lips.

It must not be supposed that, because of late Percival has not appeared upon the scene, he had given up his hope of making Mrs. Westbrook his wife; but it so happened that he was always in the country during the winter; and Cecilia did not visit at any of the houses which he frequented except Cayve Court, and there he hoped to meet her at Easter. But in the meantime he was tolerably well satisfied, having heard that Saville, the only rival whom he feared, was going to marry an actress.

“For which act of folly he has my blessing and approval,” was Percival’s comment when the, to him, good news came in a letter from Mrs. Westbrook herself.

In February there were rejoicings at Beauwood Chase upon the birth of a son. Cecilia excused herself for not attending the christening of the little Lord Beauwood

on the plea of pressing engagements in town; but the truth was she always felt bored to death in her brother-in-law's house. "He and Helen are so idiotically in love with each other," she used to say to her great ally, Mrs. Vane-Trevor, "that it makes me quite stupid to look at them, and I feel it to be almost my duty to throw an apple of discord between them."

Leda Fortescue kept steadily to her purpose, and remained at her post at the — Theatre until the end of the fifth week of Lent. Her benefit was also the closing night of her engagement, and she appeared as Gertrude in "For Love and Life" for the last time.

To say that she was not sorry to give up her connection with the stage just at the moment success was assured, would be hardly true; but she was giving it up at the desire of the man whom she loved with all her heart, and there was a blend-

ing of tears and smiles upon her sweet face as she stood for a few moments at the stage door to receive the congratulations of her friends, who crowded round to say good-bye, and to have a parting look at her.

“At last!” Saville said, as he got into the carriage after her, and shut the door with an impatient bang. “At last I may begin to look upon you as my very own.”

She had not forbidden him to escort her home on that occasion, and when he put his arm round her, and drew her head down upon his shoulder, she could not help the almost hysterical fit of crying that overcame her for a few moments. She had been working very hard of late, and her mind, too, having been but ill at ease, the excitement of her last appearance had been too much for her.

“You must rest now, darling,” Saville whispered, as he soothed her tenderly.

"Mrs. Westbrook says she does not think you have been looking well for some time."

"And have you not noticed my looks yourself, Edward? Why should Mrs. Westbrook think it necessary to tell you about them?"

"I did notice that you had been out of spirits, duller than usual for the last month, but I thought it was better not to speak of it; you always seemed bright enough when we had been together for a little while, or when you were on the stage, especially bright, indeed, when you were acting."

"Ah! if I could believe that you liked to be with me always, that our marriage would make you perfectly happy——"

"Now, Leda, I thought we were to have no more of these doubts and fancies," interrupted Saville, almost sternly. "From whom do they come? Your only friend besides Mrs. Westbrook is Lady Olivia. Does she tell you to doubt me?"

"You have read all her letters to me since our engagement, and you know how kindly she writes. No, my doubts, as you call them, are—are in my own heart."

"But have I not chosen you out of all the world for my wife? Do I not know that you love me?"

She made no answer, but clung still closer to him, and tried to keep back the tears which again threatened to break out when he kissed her, and called her his "own foolish Leda." It was true that he had chosen her out of all the world, but then it was also possible that there was some one still in the world who would be able to make him happier than she could ever hope to do.

The marriage was to take place early in May, and, at the earnest request of Lena, Saville agreed to spend the greater part of April out of England. She felt as if she must live through all that still remained of

her maiden life away from him—perhaps when it was not possible for him to see her every day, he might become impressed with a sense of the life-long misery which must ensue if he married without feeling for her the deep true love which, until she met Mrs. Westbrook, she hoped she had inspired; or perhaps absence might teach him that she was really dearer to him than the beautiful widow had ever been.

Saville agreed to go willingly enough. He was longing to make the time which had still to elapse before his wedding-day pass quickly, so he bade Leda adieu warmly enough to satisfy the most exacting heart, and started for Antwerp by way of Paris.

“I prophesy that it will be Paris *via* Paris,” Mrs. Westbrook had said, laughing, when she heard the programme of his little tour. “Who ever heard of anyone going to Antwerp by that route?”

She, too, was delighted to know that he

was to be out of the way, as she called it, for some weeks. She had wearied her brain with plans to bring about a rupture between him and Leda, but as long as he could see her every day the matter seemed quite hopeless. If she could carry out her design, which was to make Saville believe that Leda had cheated him into the belief that she loved him, the game would be in her own hands. It was but natural to suppose that he would turn to her for consolation, and find with it love far deeper and more worthy of his acceptance than that pale-faced, insignificant-looking girl had ever felt for him.

CHAPTER IX.

BUT it may be doubted whether Mrs. Westbrook's heartless scheme would have had even a remote chance of success, if certain mysterious hints which she had dropped from time to time had not deluded Leda and excited her curiosity.

Bad and unscrupulous as Cecilia had ever been when her own gratification was in question, she was scarcely bold enough to tell a deliberate falsehood to the poor girl who had so evidently staked her whole happiness upon Saville's truth and honour; but Mrs. Westbrook had so strongly persuaded herself that he would have been by that time not only her acknowledged

lover, but probably her husband, if Leda had not appeared upon the scene, and attracted him, first, by her admirable representation of the heroine of his play, and then by her evident liking for him, that she was blinded to the cruelty and baseness of her intended deception.

It was positively her duty, she thought,—she had wonderful ideas upon the subject of duty—to prevent Saville, the handsome, brilliant, clever Saville, from throwing himself away upon a second-rate actress, a girl who acknowledged that she never felt at home in the society in which he was by birth entitled to mix.

But, in spite of all these plausible arguments and clever salves to her not very troublesome conscience, Mrs. Westbrook was almost at a loss how to lead up to the subject with Leda. She did not dare, in case of failure, to betray her own secret, and yet the fact that not only was she

herself attached to Saville, but that he returned her affection, was the strong card upon which her hopes of winning the game were staked.

During the first week of his absence she had met Leda but once only, and the girl had spoken more brightly and hopefully of the future than she had ever before done to Mrs. Westbrook. She seemed more at her ease, too, than she had been wont to appear in her lover's presence, and Cecilia tried in vain to find a reason for what was so completely at variance with her own state of mind at all times where Saville was concerned.

But it was downright misery to her to feel certain that Leda probably heard from him every day, while she did not even know where he was, when he was expected home, or if he ever mentioned *her*. He did mention her very often after the first letter or two. It was, "Have you seen Mrs.

Westbrook?" "Have you been driving with Mrs. Westbrook lately?" "You ought to consult Mrs. Westbrook upon such and such a subject," and so on, until poor Leda would turn over the pages in despair, to try to find a line in which the name did not occur.

In the greater part of the letters, as may be imagined, her name was not mentioned, but it seemed to Leda as if she pervaded those precious epistles which were looked forward to so eagerly.

So nearly a fortnight passed, and then Mrs. Westbrook asked Leda to come and stay with her for a few days at Rutland Gate.

"I want to have you all to myself for a little while," Cecilia wrote. "There is nothing going on at present, and as I am quite free of engagements, we can drive about to get some of your shopping done, and have nice cosy evenings together."

Leda accepted the invitation gladly enough. There was to her a sort of resistless fascination about Mrs. Westbrook, although she was never in her company for any length of time without feeling certain that there was some connection between her and Saville, which it was the object of both to keep hidden, and she was anxious to prove whether the impression would pass away under the influence of closer companionship.

"If people want to keep a secret," Leda would often say impatiently to herself, "they should not let their friends know that there is a secret to keep." She had tried very hard to persuade herself that she was the victim of a silly delusion, that all her unhappiness was the result of a most unreasonable jealousy of the beautiful woman who had been Saville's friend for so long a time; but before she had been four-and-twenty hours

at Rutland Gate she found herself puzzled as usual to account for certain inconsistencies in Cecilia's conduct. She would sometimes speak of Saville quite naturally and carelessly, at others she avoided all mention of him, while her manner to Leda would also become for a time cold and constrained.

Leda observed also that she wore every day, morning and evening, a beautiful locket which had evidently not been long in her possession, and on several occasions the girl noticed that she used to open it and to remain for a considerable time looking intently, and with sad eyes, at its contents.

"Let me see what interests you so much," Leda said, half-jestingly one evening, as, on looking up from the book she was reading, she saw Mrs. Westbrook hastily close the trinket.

"Not for worlds," Cecilia answered,

brushing her handkerchief across her face. She felt that she was growing pale with excitement at the thought that the moment she had longed for might be at hand. Memory was busy, too, at the moment, and, all unbidden, the scene with her cousin Edgar, when he had found her with the lost diamond in her possession, came back to her. She had won that night, but with a sacrifice, was she to win to-night, also—without one?

“Not for worlds!” she repeated. “I have here all that is left to me of a dream of happiness which was too bright and too beautiful to last. It is better for you, Leda, to ask me no more.” The last words were added half inaudibly.

Leda threw aside her book, and getting up hastily she began to walk up and down the room. Her heart was beating so violently that it almost choked her.

“Mrs. Westbrook,” she said, presently,

"why is it better for me not to know? You must have some special reason for saying so. Do you think I am too hard, or too unfeeling, or too much taken up with my own—happiness," her voice faltered painfully over the word, "not to be able to feel sympathy with your trouble, whatever it may be?"

"I do not think you are either hard or unfeeling," answered Cecilia, quickly; "but," and she clasped the locket suddenly, "oh, believe me that it is better for you, of all people in the world, not to ask why it grieves me, why it breaks my heart to look into this."

"But it is not better," said Leda, firmly, as she paused in her walk beside Cecilia's chair, "if it contains, as I believe it does, a likeness of Edward Saville. Let me see it, Mrs. Westbrook, and if I am wrong, forgive what seems impertinent curiosity on my part; if I am right, then, God help me,

for there must be more for me to hear and to bear." She held out her hand as she spoke, and, as if powerless to stay her movement, or even to speak, Mrs. Westbrook relinquished her hold upon the trinket.

For a few seconds Leda paused. Was she not, it might be, about to imperil the happiness of her whole future life? But when, from the days of Eve down to the present time, has a woman been known to resist the acquisition of knowledge which might possibly drive her out of Paradise? Noticing her hesitation, Mrs. Westbrook made a feeble effort to regain her hold upon the locket; but as she did so, Leda quickly drew it away to the whole length of the long chain to which it was attached, the next moment it was open in her hand, and she saw before her an exquisitely tinted portrait of her lover; she had not in her own possession half so pleasing or so perfect a likeness.

She looked at it with wistful, eager eyes. Yes, there was the bright, handsome, clever face she loved so dearly, the laughing, blue eyes seemed to mock her as she gazed at them.

“I knew it,” she said, very quietly, as she at length closed the locket, and it fell upon her companion’s dress. “And now, Mrs. Westbrook, you must not refuse to tell me all. That you have loved Mr. Saville I have long suspected; that there either is, or has been, something more than friendship between you and him I can no longer doubt when I see that picture in your possession. Tell me truly, then, how it is that he has left you, and persuaded himself that I can make him happy?”

“And you have done so; I am nothing to him now. I lost him by my own folly, and I am rightly punished. Oh, Leda! can you not pity me?” and Mrs. Westbrook’s beautiful eyes were turned imploringly upon her guest.

"I can do more than pity you," answered Leda, sinking on her knees beside Cecilia's chair, "I can give him back to you, for I am sure, ah, only too sure," she added, with a sudden pang at her heart, "that you are far dearer to him than I have ever been! I believed he fancied he loved me because I was alone and lonely, and because, I fear, I did not hide my own feelings from him."

"And I believe I have hidden mine only too well," Mrs. Westbrook exclaimed, as if impelled to give trust for trust. "And then I was rich, and he is poor, and I pretended to be angry with him when he was madly jealous, and found fault with me for amusing myself with other men, and so it went on till at last we separated. And we did not meet again until that day at Brighton, and I knew by my misery, when I heard of his engagement with you, how fondly and devotedly I loved him. I

ought to have kept away from him ; but I was too proud to do so."

"And has he ever spoken to you of—of the past?" questioned Leda, determined to drink her cup of misery to the dregs.

"We have not dared to do so," replied Cecilia, and then seeing the resolute look upon Leda's face, she was frightened at the success of her stratagem. Suppose the excited girl were to tell Saville all that passed, what would happen?

"Leda," she said gently, as she threw her arms round the poor girl's neck, "you were cruel, very cruel, to make me tell you all this. Promise me, by all you hold most sacred, that you will not betray me to him. After a time your sweetness will win his heart, and your love will make him happy. And for me—" She threw up her hands with a little gesture of despair, and fell back in her chair crying bitterly. Never had Leda on the stage of the — Theatre acted half so well.

"Yes, after a time," repeated Leda bitterly, "when he has grown used to the woman whom he has married half from pique and half from pity, her love may make him happy, but, believe me, my love for him is too pure and too unselfish to allow me to condemn him to such a fate, and when I have left him free, you can tell him the truth yourself."

A faint smile played round Mrs. Westbrook's beautiful lips. The simplicity of her victim was almost ludicrous in the eyes of the clever and daring woman of the world.

"But you will see him again, will you not?" she said, with well-feigned earnestness. "Surely you do not——"

"You must not ask me what I am going to do," interrupted Leda, in a cold, hard voice. She could not help feeling very bitter just then against the beautiful woman who could not hide that her chief anxiety was

to appear in the best light in Saville's eyes. "It is far better that you should not know. You have been kind to me, and I thank you heartily, but if you had told me the truth earlier, you would have been kinder still. Forget me now as soon as possible ; and when he comes to you, make him happy. Of *your* happiness I can have no doubt whatever."

She got up hastily, took some work she had been doing, and put it away in her little work-basket, went to the piano, and took a song from the desk which she had sung for Mrs. Westbrook not an hour before, and then left the room.

Early the next morning, long before Cecilia was stirring, she had gone back to her lodgings in Church Street, and in the evening a parcel, containing the handsome wedding presents given by Mrs. Westbrook, was left by a carrier at Rutland Gate.

"I hope she is not going to make away with herself," was that lady's comment when she opened the parcel. "And yet what a relief it would be to know that she could not change her mind. If she takes it into her head to meet him again, and to have an explanation, it is all over with me, and I may as well marry Fred Percival at once."

But with the disgrace of discovery hanging over her, she dressed in her usual sumptuous manner, and went to a reception—the first of the season—at the Foreign Office. She met a crowd of well-known people there, yet amongst the faces there was one that was strange, and yet familiar. But the first months of her married life were vividly brought back to her when, later on in the evening, Lady — presented to her Prince Michael Petöfi, and she found herself claimed as an old acquaintance by the gigantic and fierce-eyed

Hungarian who had singled her out as the object of his attentions at Nice while she was still a bride.

His admiration was now as unmistakable as it had been then, and she told Percival in her next letter that "Princess" was the lowest title she intended to accept. Not knowing that there was such a person as Prince Michael in existence, the gallant captain looked upon the announcement as a good omen for himself.

Could Mrs. Westbrook have known that the Prince had come to England to try to make up for his extravagance and enormous losses at play by a marriage with the rich Englishwoman whom he had met at Nice, and whom he had lost sight of, but never entirely forgotten—quite by accident he had heard that she was a widow—she would have been a little less eager to accept his homage.

But ever greedy of winning admiration

and devotion from men, she lavished her brightest looks and sweetest smiles upon Prince Michael, and even while she did so she was thinking of Leda and Edward Saville, wondering if the former would keep to her resolve, and if the latter would turn to her for comfort and consolation.

“If we were but married I could make him love me,” she said to herself, while at the same moment she raised her lovely eyes to the face of the haughty Hungarian, and affected the most profound incredulity when he declared in fluent English that he had never recovered from the spell which her beauty had thrown round him at their first meeting a few years before.

CHAPTER X.

THIS period was what some people would have called the turning point in Mrs. Westbrook's life. There is a popular delusion that in the hearts of those as unscrupulous as she was, there is a constant struggle going on between good and evil. But her conscience had never given her the slightest trouble, and she had never been a good woman, although up to that time she had been what Heinrich Heine has forcibly but coarsely called "anatomically virtuous." Of course no one for a moment suspected that her wealth had been gained by a cruel and heartless fraud.

But it seemed even to herself that she became more reckless from the moment that Leda Fortescue's happiness had been blighted by a wicked lie. It seemed fated that the bliss she coveted was never to be hers by fair means. She never tried to hide from herself that it would have been much more satisfactory from every point of view if in those days, which now seemed so very far away, her cousin Edgar had really stolen the diamond. His rectitude had actually driven her into duplicity and crime to enable her to gain the end she had in view.

And then, again, if Edward Saville had not been about the only man of her acquaintance who had been unmoved by her beauty and untempted by her wealth, she might have had the happiness of marrying for love. Was she to be blamed because he perversely attached himself to another woman? It was just a chance—but a very

good chance, Mrs. Westbrook considered—that if Leda gave him up, disappointment would make him turn to the love which had been his for so long, but even in that happiness there would be a canker. She craved for the whole of his heart, and it would be hard upon her to feel that although he might be hers by the closest of all human ties, the lost Leda would still hold her place in his thoughts.

With this mental conflict raging within her, Cecilia could with difficulty restrain her impatience for the end to come. Several days had passed, and she had not heard anything of Leda. What had become of her? Had she written to Saville? Had he come to London? Had they met? And did the utter silence mean that she was betrayed?—that he knew all she had dared to win him, and did he despise her accordingly? But it was useless to ask that last question—contempt would follow discovery

as surely as seed time follows harvest.

At length, determined to know the worst, she drove to Church Street one afternoon, to call upon Leda, about a week after their last meeting. In imagination she saw her with Saville, happier than ever, because convinced that the story of his love for another was a falsehood ; but even such a mental picture realised would not be harder to bear than all the miserable suspense, so she summoned up all her courage to meet the worst as her carriage stopped at the well-known door.

Mrs. Chester, the landlady, was out, but her sister, a worthy washerwoman, who had often admired Mrs. Westbrook, and thought how very troublesome the under-garments of such a fine lady would be to make up and iron, came out to the door of the carriage to answer Cecilia's inquiries.

"Miss Fortescue had left. She had had a man in quite promiscuous like, and he

packed up all her furniture and things, which it were most surprising how fast it were done, but no, not if Mrs. Westbrook were to give her the Crown jewels—which a stone of soap would be more useful, it would—could she tell her where that there younglady were gone. She'ad 'oped, she had, likewise her sister, that there was a some-think hup when they see'd that 'andsome young gent a-walkin' of her hout, but no young lady as ever saw a marriage-ring before her ever looked as that poor Miss Fortescue did when she went away. I ses to my sister, I ses, she looks more like the Regent's Canal, she do. No, she had left no address, and there was two letters waiting for her upstairs, which she thought were from foreign parts."

Letters from Saville, of course. Mrs. Westbrook would gladly have possessed herself of them, but prudence forbade. If Leda had not written to him, he would no

doubt call at her lodgings and find his letters unopened.

After her visit to Church Street, Cecilia had no resource but to wait. She longed for and yet dreaded the return of the lover. So much depended upon how he bore Leda's desertion. If, as Mrs. Westbrook hoped, he made up his mind not to grieve for her, she might safely leave the rest to time, he was young—he was neither ice nor marble—and her beauty would conquer him at last.

Several days before the date originally fixed for his return, Saville arrived in England. He had been beyond measure surprised and alarmed at the sudden cessation of letters from Leda, and he had begun to fear that she was ill, and not able to write.

On reaching Church Street, and finding there no trace of her, and half a dozen of his own letters lying unclaimed in her now

empty sitting-room, the bewildered young man could but believe that she was dead. The idea that she had been false was less intolerable than the idea that they were suddenly separated by death.

But when he had heard all that the landlady had to tell him, he was obliged to admit that she had deserted him, and the probability that she had not gone away alone was maddening. Mrs. Westbrook's words about the beauty of her acting came back to him with all the force which she had intended them to bear when they were spoken.

"Perhaps she knows," he said, and as fast as a "hansom" could carry him along he went to Rutland Gate.

But the time of his visit was most inopportune. There was a gentleman sitting with Mrs. Westbrook whom he had never seen before, a foreigner, with a tall, strong figure, bold dark eyes, and a face which

would have been handsome, but for the traces of hard living which it bore.

Intimate associates of Prince Michael, if he had had any in England (but he was as yet comparatively a stranger), could have told Mrs. Westbrook that he was not only a gambler, but a hard drinker, when the passion seized him. No one would have suspected it, had he looked always as he looked that afternoon, as he leaned back in the easiest of the many easy chairs in Mrs. Westbrook's drawing-room, and talked to her with all the ease and familiarity of a very old and intimate friend.

She had made herself acquainted with the history—so far as it was known to their common friends—of this new adorer. She had heard that during a visit to England, while she was still a school-girl, he had been named as the future husband of a lady nearly allied to the royal family; but that the negotiation had fallen through,

because the Prince would not consent to become a naturalised English subject.

Of course the facts of the case were widely different from the story told to Mrs. Westbrook ; but even had she known that it was so it would not in the least have interfered with her triumph in having brought such a magnificent prize to her feet. If all hope of winning Saville failed, she could console herself by becoming a Princess !

In spite of her self-control her heart gave a great bound, and her cheeks were flushed with a sudden rush of colour, when Saville came in, looking utterly cast down and miserable, and Prince Michael would not have been flattered had he known how cordially at that moment Mrs. Westbrook wished him at the farthest point of his own wild country.

But he was not going to leave that fair-haired boy behind him at Rutland Gate, so

the two men sat on, and stared at one another for fully an hour, while the Prince alone talked, for Saville could not rouse himself to say more than yes or no.

At last, in desperation, Mrs. Westbrook made a bold stroke, and Prince Michael had to retire.

"I am going to be very rude, and turn you both out," she said, looking at her watch. "I have an engagement for five o'clock, and it wants but a few minutes of the hour. Mr. Saville, you must tell me about your travels another time. Prince, you are to have the honour of meeting me to-night at Albert Gate."

He made a gallant reply, to the effect that, until he saw her again, the hours would move on leaden wheels, and bending low over her hand, he kissed it. With her eyes, as she shook hands with Saville, she contrived to say, "Come back at once," and the Prince's mail phaeton had barely

turned into the park, before the poor young fellow was again in her drawing-room, standing before her, and holding her hands tightly clasped in his own, while he said, with pathetic earnestness,

"Oh! Mrs. Westbrook, can you tell me what has become of Leda?"

"I have been dreading this moment, dreading it more than I can tell you," she replied, evading his question, although she could have answered it with perfect truth, as far as the actual whereabouts of the girl was concerned. "What can I say to you? How can I comfort you?"

"No one can comfort me," he answered, blind to the tenderness of her eyes, and deaf to the music of her voice. "In a few days she would have been my wife, and I come back to find her little room empty, and my letters to her lying unopened. What is the meaning of it all? Why was I sent away? Surely it cannot be possible

that she was plotting to deceive me, when she said she wished me to go."

Mrs. Westbrook did not speak, he had let her hands fall, and he was sitting in Prince Michael's favourite chair, with his perplexed face turned up to hers. She was standing beside him.

"You do not speak," he went on impatiently. "Is it because you can tell me only what will add to my despair?"

"I cannot tell you anything," she answered. "I have not seen Leda, nor heard from her, for more than a week. She came to stay with me, as perhaps you know from her letters, and we were as happy as possible together. I thought she was, if possible, more charming than ever. She sang one of your songs for me the last evening, and we sat working and talking, or reading, until bed time——"

"Did she talk about me—about our marriage?" interrupted Saville.

"As well as I remember," said Mrs. Westbrook, pausing over her words as if in consideration, "the marriage was not directly mentioned. She never spoke much of you to me, I often noticed that, but I thought it might be shyness, so there was not anything remarkable in her reserve that last evening."

"Well, what next? When did she leave you, and have you seen her since?"

"She left next day, and I have not seen her since. I was very much surprised to get back the wedding presents—you know them—which I had given her, but unfortunately I was not able to drive over to Church Street the day after they came. Had I done so, I might have found her, but when I was able to go, she had left."

"But you must have some supposition in your own mind, people always have," said Saville. "Tell me all that you suspect; had I a rival, and do you think she has gone—gone off with him?"

"It is almost impossible to believe that she has gone alone," answered Cecilia. "What motive could she have had for throwing you over if she were not going away with some one whom she found she liked better, or who could—there, do not look so miserable!" she broke off, as a sharp spasm of pain crossed his face, "you force me to speak, and then you are angry."

"Not with you, my kind, true friend," he answered, laying his hand upon her arm. She instantly put her hand over it and clasped it closely. "Your opinion is, I am sure, only what the opinion of every sensible man or woman in the world would be if they heard the story; but I loved her, and I cannot all at once give in that she has cheated me."

"And although you have been cheated you love her still?" With un pitying terseness she put the question, and Saville

wincing visibly as he heard it. It was one thing for him to say himself that he had been cheated, but the word seemed to him to have a more cruel meaning when spoken by another.

"As I can never love any other woman," he answered, unconsciously punishing her for her question. "Do not think I am a poor, spiritless creature for saying so," he added, as Mrs. Westbrook released his hand from hers, and then her own arm from his clasp. "Remember the blow has been but lately struck, and that to your eyes alone could I show all my weakness; if you have ever known the meaning of love you must pity me to-day."

"Pity you!" he was startled by the passionate energy with which she repeated his words. "Oh, Edward! if some day you would let me tell you how much," she covered her face with her hands, for all that she felt then was real, and a rare

impulse of womanly shame made her for a moment hide her glowing cheeks from his gaze.

He got up hastily, and walked away to a distant window; a glimmering of the truth began to break in upon him, and he would have been less than human had not the idea brought comfort to his outraged, wounded heart. Smarting under the too patent treachery of one woman, was there in the world a man who would not have found consolation in the gentle, pitying tenderness of a creature so beautiful as Mrs. Westbrook?

But he could not bring himself just then to dwell upon the revelation which she had doubtless inadvertently made to him; to do so would be to lower himself in her eyes, and to take an unfair advantage of her in a moment of weakness.

When he turned towards her again she was standing in a dejected attitude, just

where he had left her, but her face was perfectly calm, and if it was a little paler than usual, it had never seemed more beautiful in Saville's eyes.

"Mrs. Westbrook," he said, going up to her, "I cannot tell you how angry I am with myself for having shown such unmanly weakness in your presence. You have always been far, far kinder to me than I deserve, for I cannot forget that it was to gratify me you made the acquaintance of one of whom I do not wish to speak just now. It will be some time before you and I meet again, for at present I could not stay in England; but will you not believe me when I tell you that the remembrance of you and of your kindness will brighten many a dark hour."

"And remember that there may be many a dark hour in England which your presence could brighten," she answered impulsively, as for one second she let her eyes meet his.

“ If I could believe that, I might perhaps believe in happiness again,” he said in a low voice, as he took the hand she held out, and pressed it warmly. One moment more he lingered, and then he went away sadly, leaving the woman whom he had so blindly trusted, with the bitterest tears she had ever shed falling from her beautiful eyes.

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. WESTBROOK spent that evening alone, and Prince Michael looked for her in vain at the reception at Albert Gate. The parting with Saville for an indefinite time had been too much even for her. Was it for that she had plotted and schemed and risked so much? She had so buoyed herself up with the hope that when he found himself deserted by Leda he would at once turn to her. She had so little delicacy of mind, she was so anxious to grasp at once the pleasure she craved for, that she could not have understood, even if she had recognised, his dread of appearing fickle in her eyes, or too eager

to take advantage of the tender sympathy she expressed for his sorrow.

But she knew what words had trembled on her lips, and how by a violent effort only she had refrained from asking him not to leave her, as he was dearer to her than life itself. She had fully persuaded herself that it was so, and yet the love she gloried in was not strong enough to purify and ennoble her character.

Writers of both sexes, in the past age and in the present, have dwelt rapturously upon the elevating influence of one of the master-passions of our nature, but love, unaided, has never yet changed a selfish nature into an unselfish one, or been strong enough to hold back an unscrupulous man or woman from committing the basest possible actions in order to gratify the insane desire for personal appropriation which they dignify with the name of Love.

Mrs. Westbrook used to declare to her-

self a hundred times a day that she could die, if need were, for the handsome and brilliant young fellow who had captivated her fancy, but she could not do a far simpler and easier thing—allow him to be happy with the woman he loved.

Leda herself was by no means faultless, for had she been more open, and, from the first, less suspicious of her lover's truth, she could not have fallen such an easy victim to Mrs. Westbrook's wiles; but her love for Saville was perfectly pure and unselfish, and, without the hesitation of a moment, she had sacrificed herself for, as she believed, his happiness, and with the calmness born of despair she set herself to learn the hard lesson of renunciation.

After her trying interview with Saville, Mrs. Westbrook simply put the girl completely out of her mind. She felt satisfied that he would not try to find Leda, and as long as the two kept apart she was perfectly

safe. But she chafed horribly at the fresh separation from him. In all her calculations as to what might happen, it never occurred to her that he could want time to recover from the blow he had received. She had pictured to herself a speedy engagement, to be quickly followed by marriage, and the discomfiture of all her admirers, when the fact was announced.

A short wedding tour would have enabled her to come back to town in time for the height of the season, and her zest for all the frivolous gaiety she loved so well would be increased tenfold by the consciousness of her happiness as Saville's wife. The audacious but flattering homage of Prince Michael, and the reproaches of Percival, would be doubly sweet to her, if she could listen to them unfettered by the dread that she might one day be obliged to accept one or the other for her husband.

That Saville might possibly object to her

flirtations, after marriage, with men who had been avowed lovers during her widowhood, was a contingency that never entered her head, the fact that she had chosen him ought, of course, to be a satisfactory proof of her regard.

But what to do with all these troublesome admirers, during the interval that Saville chose to spend wandering about Europe, was really a perplexing question. She felt that Percival might at any moment insist upon definite acceptance or rejection. She could not accept him, and yet to reject him was to run the chance of turning him from a pleasant friend into a disappointed enemy.

Then the Prince would not bear being played fast and loose with too long; and, besides, if the hopes which she had centred upon Saville should ultimately fall to the ground, why should she not, having been disappointed in love, gratify her ambition by becoming a Princess?

She showed her usual sagacity in not having any fear that Saville would try to find out what had become of Leda. He gave her up at once, when the idea that she had thrown him over for a new lover had been confirmed by Mrs. Westbrook's reluctance to say anything definite upon the subject. Had any doubt remained in his mind, he would have written to his cousin, Lady Olivia Forrester, to ask if she knew anything of Leda's whereabouts; but feeling perfectly satisfied, he remained silent. How often and how bitterly he regretted his folly in after-days was known only to himself. But how rarely are we wise in time!

To meet Leda as the wife of a fortunate rival would be not only maddening but humiliating; so, without the loss of an hour, he set about his preparations, and the morning after he had said good-bye to Mrs. Westbrook, he started again for Paris.

Throughout his journey he reproached himself for the coldness with which he had received all the kindness and womanly sympathy Cecilia had lavished upon him; and his first act, when he arrived in Paris, was to write to her. And it was such a frank and manly letter. He could not help feeling, as he wrote, that he was addressing a woman who felt for him a warmer regard than friendship, but the time had not yet come for him to dwell upon the idea.

Still it gave him pleasure, and insensibly influenced the tone of his letter. He ended by asking permission to write to her sometimes. It need hardly be said that she granted it most graciously, and so the correspondence began which gradually, but surely, paved the way for the fruition of all her hopes.

Never before, not even from Leda, had Saville received such delightful letters. They sparkled all over with wit and

humour, and were never without some allusion—upon which he dwelt more and more as time went on—to the pleasure which his return to England would give the writer.

“Could any man wish for a happier, brighter fate than to call that beautiful creature his own?” Saville said to himself one day, as he read over and over again one of Mrs. Westbrook’s charming epistles. He was just then enjoying for the first time the unequalled loveliness of Northern Italy, and his ardent and poetic soul was fired with its beauty. Lonely at heart, and longing, as a poet and a dreamer only can long, for the congenial companion who has not only the power but the will to sympathise, it is not to be wondered at if the sad and heart-sore young fellow turned eagerly and gratefully to the only communion possible to him just then with the one being in the wide world who knew what he

had suffered, and who was willing, he could not doubt it, to give him far more than he had lost, for was she not more beautiful than the lost Leda, and a million times more brilliant and captivating?

And yet, even while his fancy was caught and held captive by the remembrance of Mrs. Westbrook's grace and beauty, and while he felt as if his life-long devotion would be but a poor return to her for stooping to his level—for although well-born he had no equivalent to offer for her wealth—he knew but too well that never again could any woman be to him what the “maiden with the soft eyes full of fancies” had been. No one had ever understood him as she had learned to do during the two happy months which had preceded their engagement—she had entered so thoroughly into every thought and feeling, she had been so entirely the complement of himself. He might marry

Mrs. Westbrook, and be very happy with her, but he could never feel for her what Novalis has so finely called the "tenderness which is the *repose of passion*," and which was so pre-eminently a characteristic of his attachment to Leda Fortescue. Mrs. Westbrook was not calculated by nature to inspire such a rare and delicate sentiment.

The weeks passed on, it was nearly the end of June, and, animated by the hopes which Saville's letters kept alive, Mrs. Westbrook steered successfully through the difficulties of her second London season. Prince Michael was metaphorically, if not literally, at her feet, and, by a magical process known only to herself, she contrived to keep him there, in patient expectation of the happy moment when it would be her pleasure to listen to his suit.

Percival was sulky, but not alienated, for if she was cold and capricious to him

in public, she more than made up to him by her kindness when, as it not unfrequently happened, they had a delightful *tête-à-tête* dinner at Rutland Gate.

The world was, just then, it must be confessed, singularly indulgent to Mrs. Westbrook. She could do many things with perfect impunity, that would have ruined the character of any other woman less popular, or, shall I say, less able by the magic of her wealth to make herself necessary to the society in which she lived.

She had lost some of the caution which had been one of her strongest characteristics when she first came out; perfect immunity from any slanderous reports had made her just a little reckless, and no woman in the world enjoyed more thoroughly playing with fire than she did.

But as the hope of winning Saville grew and strengthened every day, so did she

begin most earnestly to wish that some letters of hers addressed to Percival were in her own hands. Not that there was anything in them exactly of a compromising nature, but they were decidedly lax in tone and sentiment, and to those who are unaware of the remarkable amount of freedom that prevails between men and women of the fast and fashionable world, they might seem to imply that there was a very close intimacy existing between the writer of the letters and the person to whom they were addressed. Such an implication as regarded Mrs. Westbrook and Percival was, at that time, positively untrue, but it pleased her to write to him in a free and easy style, and it pleased him to keep the letters, as they gave him a slight hold upon the woman whom he had determined to marry if possible.

She had ever before her a vision of Saville's horror and disgust if it ever came

to his knowledge that such epistles had been written by his wife. He was so unlike the young men of the age; he had such reverence for women that it shocked him beyond measure to learn that some of them were made of very coarse and common clay indeed; and in spite of her ardent desire to win his heart, Mrs. Westbrook was wont to consider this proneness on his part to set up a beautiful woman on a pedestal as a divinity to be worshipped rather than as a mere mortal to be wooed and won, a very troublesome trait in his character; and it was, therefore, to her, downright hard work to write the letters which he thought were so charming; far easier was it to dash off one of those piquant missives full of the fashionable slang of the day, which Percival found no less delightful.

During the increased familiarity brought about by her anxiety to keep her most

troublesome admirer in good humour until her fate as regarded Saville was decided, Mrs. Westbrook became acquainted with the unfortunate episode in her sister's life, which poor Helen looked back upon with such horror.

Cecilia had always been impressed with the idea that there was, or had been, some secret understanding between Lady Forrester and Captain Percival, and having in her mind a vague dislike to her brother-in-law, founded upon her own futile attempt to separate him from Helen, she determined, if possible, to find out what the understanding was.

Women are proverbially clever in such matters, and Mrs. Westbrook was, above all others, fitted to succeed in gaining possession of a secret. Percival was not by any means a fool, but having, on his own part, a very important object to gain, he was the more easily beguiled into making a confidant of Mrs. Westbrook.

But when it was too late, he was sincerely sorry for having betrayed Helen.

"I suppose I can trust you not to do anything to hurt your own sister, Queenie?" he had said, when Mrs. Westbrook had finished her exclamations of surprise at having, as she said, "found out the extremely proper wife of the greatest prig in England."

"You know what a fellow Forrester is, and I would not for worlds do or say anything to make Lady Forrester unhappy. She is one of the few women in England for whom I have a thorough respect."

"Complimentary to the large majority who cannot venture to compete with her," Mrs. Westbrook replied gaily. "I cannot think how she ever did it, myself! Why, she hardly ventures to walk across a room if her husband is not with her."

"She was not an atom to blame in the matter!" Percival was almost injudicious-

ly warm in his defence. "I regularly talked her into running off with me, and I can honestly say that I was never more delighted in my life than when I found she had run away again."

"That she ran away again is just the part of the story that no one would believe," rejoined Mrs. Westbrook, with a most mischievous smile, "especially if, as you say, she really ran back to her mamma the very same day she had left! I believe, myself, it would be possible to find a slight discrepancy in the dates, if a detective were set to work."

"If I thought you were serious, Mrs. Westbrook," Percival answered, very gravely, for him, "it would lower you considerably in my opinion, not that I believe you value it very highly. Outrageous propriety is not my speciality, but for a woman to be anxious to convict her own sister of a very serious indiscretion, passes my be-

lief; but of course you are only jesting."

"Of course I am," she replied. "You ought to know my way by this."

"I do not get quite enough of *that* way to please me," he answered, with a marked change of tone, for having risen as she said the last words, Mrs. Westbrook had passed behind his chair, and stooping down, had touched his forehead with her lips."

"Do not flatter yourself, then, that you are going to have any more of it," she said, laughing. "That little condescension was only to show that I did not bear any malice for your severe scolding." And the subject of Helen's elopement was not mentioned between them again.

CHAPTER XII.

THE conversation related in the last chapter had taken place in June, and had followed the unusually early departure from town of the Forresters. Helen was not quite strong enough to bear the ceaseless racket of the season, and both she and her husband were happier in the solitude of Beauwood. Lady Olivia, who had always some business on hand when she was in England, some institution which she thought was in need of her personal supervision, or some charitable scheme which she was anxious to float, stayed on alone at Beauwood House.

She could have told Saville where to find Leda Fortescue, but she was so angry with him for having, as she believed, so cruelly deceived her *protégée*, that even had he been in England she would have cut him dead in her own peculiarly brusque manner had she met him. Of course he had been bewitched by that Mrs. Westbrook, but that had only made his conduct, as regarded poor Leda, the more heartless.

The first week in July, Saville, who was then in the Engadine, taking advantage of the brief summer vouchsafed to dwellers in those high latitudes, wrote the letter which would, if favourably received by Mrs. Westbrook, change all his plans, and bring him back to England her accepted suitor.

"I cannot," he wrote, "hide from myself the humiliating fact that, if you accept me, the world will say I have done a good thing for myself in marrying you; but I believe that *you* will not for one moment

accuse me of a mean or mercenary motive in asking you to be my wife. If, however, I have been vain and presumptuous in gathering from the tone of your kind letters—letters which have been my only solace during my absence from England—that in your regard for me there is nothing warmer and deeper than friendship tell me so frankly, and I must try to school myself to bear the loneliness of heart and life which becomes heavier and drearier every day. But if I am not mistaken, if you feel that you can trust your happiness to me, one line from you will change gloom to sunshine, and bring me back to England to lay my life-long devotion and gratitude at your feet.”

Need it be told what the answer was? For once in her life Mrs. Westbrook forgot her schemes, and allowed the only weakness which had ever found a place in her cold, worldly heart, full sway. There was

not anyone present when she got the letter to be impressed by her show of emotion ; so the tears she shed over it were genuine, and no man, who knew her only as Saville did, could have doubted the fervour and reality of the love which, now that reserve would be a fault instead of a virtue, she poured out in her reply to his letter.

“Do not talk about doing good to yourself by marrying me,” she said, “had it been possible long ago to have bought your love with my wealth, you would now be about to marry a woman bankrupt in everything except the most unchangeable and devoted affection. I do not deny,” she added, by way of enhancing the sacrifice she was so willing to make, “that my friends will all think I am little short of mad, they have all been so kindly bent upon marrying me to the Hungarian Prince Michael, of whom I have told you, that it will take some little time to convince them

that I am weak-minded enough to prefer love to ambition ; and yet, ardently as I look forward to our meeting, I ask you to stay abroad until the season is over. I mean, as soon as my engagements will allow, to leave town for Beauwood Chase. My sister and Arthur will, I know, be delighted to welcome you there, and we can be married quietly, without any fuss or parade."

She could not have made any proposition more acceptable to Saville, so he gladly wrote his agreement to the plan, and then he set himself resolutely to put the past out of his thoughts ; to think of Leda now was to wrong the beautiful woman to whom he could never show sufficient gratitude for having chosen him above all her peers and princes.

Mrs. Westbrook's plans were very quickly made when she at last saw the future plain before her. She wrote to Helen, and

begged to be allowed to run down to Beauwood for a little change and rest. She was tired to death, she said, with all she had gone through, and if she could not escape "Goodwood," and then the "fagging" which was before her if she went to Cowes for the regatta week, she thought she should die.

"Let her come by all means," Lord Forrester had said at once. He did not very cordially like Mrs. Westbrook, but he was always kind and good-natured to her. She was Helen's sister, and therefore she must have some good in her. "I wish she would marry and settle down," he said when the question of her visit had been arranged. "I really think she could hardly do better than accept Percival. She would be happier with him than with Prince Michael."

"Oh! no, no," Helen had answered. She could not bear the idea of being obliged to accept Percival as a brother-in-

law, and feeling conscious, as she spoke, that her husband would be surprised at her unnecessary vehemence, she had coloured painfully.

"I can never account for your dislike to that match, Helen," Lord Forrester had answered, severely and suspiciously, his wife thought, for conscience made a coward of her at the moment, and then he dropped the subject immediately, as was his invariable custom when not very well pleased.

Mrs. Westbrook most cleverly contrived to avoid a farewell meeting with the Prince, and when she suddenly disappeared from the Row, and from the Opera, and when he could not find her early or late at Rutland Gate, or at the houses of their common acquaintances, he was obliged to content himself with the hope of meeting her again at Cowes. He had already, he thought, borne quite long enough with her caprices,

but however much she might coquet with him, he did not think she would refuse the title and position he was prepared to offer.

Percival was considerably startled and perplexed by her sudden flight from town. She had never, he knew, taken a step so unusual without a strong motive, and his suspicions at once pointed in the right direction—that of Saville. He had not felt quite satisfied that she would not throw herself away, from the moment he heard that the handsome young author had re-appeared in the dangerously attractive light of a man who had been jilted by another woman, and when she suddenly left town, Percival jumped to the conclusion that she had gone away to be married. It was a slight relief to his mind to hear, as he soon did, that she was at Beauwood Chase, but he knew her too well to believe that she had gone to rusticate there for pleasure only.

He was not intimate enough with Lord Forrester to offer himself as a guest, but he did the next best thing—he went down to stay with his father, whose shooting box, or “hut,” as he called it, was only a few miles across the fields from the Chase; and then, having given a day or two to the mature consideration of his position, he wrote to Mrs. Westbrook, and for the second time asked her to be his wife.

“You have played with me quite long enough,” he wrote—“too long, in fact, and I do not see how you can throw me over now, and say that you never gave me any encouragement.”

“The man who marries her will have to look sharp after her,” he thought, as he sealed and addressed his letter. “And I could not tell her, as I did once before, that if I were rich and she poor she would still be the one woman in the world for me.”

“Encouragement—yes, but not a promise ; he cannot prove that,” Mrs. Westbrook thought as she read his letter. She decided at once that but one thing was possible under the circumstances : she must throw herself upon his mercy, tell him honestly that she was engaged, and offer him the same friendship from Mrs. Saville which he had so long enjoyed from Mrs. Westbrook. But she had very strong misgivings that what had satisfied him while she was still free, and when the hope of winning herself and her money was still before him, would not content him when it was absolutely impossible for her to be his wife. She had been some time at Beauwood when his proposal reached her, and she had told the Forresters of her engagement to Saville. Helen had congratulated her most warmly ; she was pleased to see that her worldly and ambitious sister could marry for love. Lord Forrester was less

demonstrative; he did not think Saville had made a wise choice, and he took it upon himself to give Cecilia a little lecture upon her proneness to flirtation.

Percival's name was naturally enough mentioned more than once during the conversation, and Mrs. Westbrook fiercely resented, what she called, her brother-in-law's impertinent interference in her—amusements; but she kept her temper admirably, and listened with apparent patience to his somewhat wordy address.

“I plead guilty as regards Prince Michael,” she said, with the greatest sweetness, when he had finished, “but I think if I were to tell you all I know about Captain Percival and the name of the real object of his attentions, you would be not a little surprised. She is a married woman, and if her husband ever hears the history of the intimacy that formerly existed between her and the man whom you are

good enough to call my lover, it will break his heart."

There was a significance in Mrs. Westbrook's manner which made Lord Forrester wince. To whom could she have been alluding? And then Helen's unaccountable dislike to the idea of a marriage between Percival and her sister came back to him.

Happiness has been well defined as a frail possession, which a look can injure and a word destroy. The peace which had filled Lord Forrester's heart from the hour of his marriage was disturbed from that moment, and Mrs. Westbrook was not blind to the fact.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE day was fixed for Saville's return, and Mrs. Westbrook was to meet him in London, but the marriage was to take place either from Beauwood or from Calvert Hall; the bride elect had not yet made up her mind upon that point.

She had one stormy interview with Percival, a private one, for, after her conversation with her brother-in-law, she did not dare to meet him openly. He had been so hurt and angry with her that she had not kept to her resolve to tell him of her engagement, but she reproached him for his want of trust in her, and for wishing to

bind her down by a promise before she had made up her mind whether she liked him well enough to marry him. Then she had tried very hard to coax him to give back her letters, but all in vain.

“If, as he hoped, she meant to marry him some day,” he said, “the letters might as well remain in his hands ; if not, did she grudge him all that would be left to him of the most charming and most cruel coquette in the world?”

At last, driven into a corner, she got away from him by giving a promise to meet him at the end of another week. Their trysting-place was a pretty secluded spot, which Helen called her deserted garden.

Close to the house, and visible from the windows of the principal reception-rooms, there was a quaint and picturesque old ruin, which had puzzled many an antiquarian, and stretching away beyond the

ruin, and of course hidden by it from the house, was the piece of ground which had once been a garden, and which Helen declared it would be sacrilege to restore. So, with infinite care and trouble, she had kept it in its wild and tangled state, and assured her husband, who was slightly held in bondage by his bump of order, that she liked it far better than the prim borders, beds, and terraces of which the gardener was so proud.

It was very easy for Mrs. Westbrook to slip out in the twilight of the autumn evening, and to Percival the walk across the fields from his father's house was a mere nothing. But when the day she had appointed for her second interview with him came round (she was to leave for London on the next), Mrs. Westbrook's courage failed, and she determined, if possible, to send a substitute, in the person of her sister.

When the idea first occurred to her, it is only just to acknowledge that she did not contemplate making any mischief between Helen and Lord Forrester. If he were unluckily to find out that his wife had had a clandestine meeting with one of the fastest men in England, it would punish him for having dared to lecture his sister-in-law upon her conduct.

It was just possible that if Helen went out in the evening, Lord Forrester would miss her, for he was always, as Mrs. Westbrook used to say, with great contempt, "following her about like a dog," but of course the affair would blow over. "Helen would get her scolding, poor dear, and then be kissed and forgiven!"

The day appointed for the interview came, and Mrs. Westbrook went to her sister's morning-room, at a well-chosen hour in the forenoon, when she knew that her brother-in-law was out.

“I have come to ask you the greatest possible favour, dearest Nellie,” she said, “and I am sure you will help me. I need hardly tell you that, ever since I have known him, Captain Percival has been trying to persuade me to marry him; but, as I believe him to be both heartless and a fortune-hunter, I could not have trusted my happiness in his hands—marriage is such a terrible lottery—even if I had not met my dear Edward.”

“Was it not a pity, then, to encourage him as you did?” said Helen. “I always thought you liked him.”

“Yes, as an agreeable friend, but not as a lover. But men are so stupid and tiresome. They do not understand when you say you want to be friends. And now Captain Percival declares that I have gone too far to throw him over; and he threatens all sorts of things. I cannot think what the creature means. I never

even gave him a kiss but once, and that was ages ago. Still I suppose I have been to blame somehow; and I am afraid, if Arthur were to hear all about it, he would think it his duty—you know how tiresome he is about duty—just as if people were never to do anything except what was exactly right and proper—to tell Edward Saville; and he, poor darling! is so desperately in love with me, and so jealous, that I do not know what would happen.”

“Take my advice,” said Helen, “and tell him yourself.”

“Oh, my dearest Nellie, not for worlds!” cried Mrs. Westbrook. “I am sure you did not tell Arthur about all the men who made love to you before you were married. There, do not blush so about it. No, I could not tell Edward; but I mean to turn over a new leaf, and never to flirt again—*never*. And if you will but help me out of

this scrape, you will be the dearest sister in the world."

"You must not ask me to do anything Arthur would disapprove of," said Helen. "You know how particular he is."

"Nonsense, child! You have quite spoiled him by your slavish devotion. It would make me miserable if I were never to have a little quarrel with my husband. However, I cannot force you to help me; you must do as you like. I promised to meet Captain Percival at—let me see—oh, from half-past nine to ten this evening in your deserted garden, to tell him, once for all, whether I mean to marry him or not. Now I have not only to tell him that I do not intend to marry him, but also that I am engaged to Mr. Saville; and I confess my courage fails me when I think of his anger and disappointment. I am really afraid to be alone with him."

"But why not write?" asked Helen, who

hated her sister's unconquerable love of mystery and intrigue.

"Oh, I have had enough to do with letters, thank you," Mrs. Westbrook answered. "And, besides, I have not time to write now. A letter would not reach him until to-morrow, and he would spend his night pacing up and down under the ruins like a caged lion ; or else he would come on here and make a fuss. I really feel as if, somehow, he will compel me to marry him if I meet him."

"I am very sorry," said Helen, "but I cannot go. Just think of the consequences if I were to be seen with him at that hour ! Let me tell Arthur, and ask him to come with me."

"Well, you are a simpleton, Helen, to think of dragging your husband about with you on an errand of that kind. Have you no consideration for poor Captain Percival ? Think of the humiliating position into

which you would put him. And it would be so easy for you just to slip out for ten minutes when we come out of the dining-room. Arthur will think you are in the nursery, and I can do my best to keep him amused."

"I do not like to be ill-natured and to refuse," said Helen; "but I am sure it is unwise to consent."

"No; but the very kindest and nicest thing you have ever done, darling! If I send my maid she will chatter about it all over the place, and I know I can trust you not to betray me whatever happens."

"Very well," said Helen, "I promise. I am to tell him that you are engaged to Mr. Saville. Is that all?"

"Oh, beg of him to send back all my letters; I am sure he will not refuse, if *you* ask him."

The promise once given, Mrs. Westbrook knew that Helen would not play her false.

Had she herself been in Lady Forrester's place, she would never have made such a promise ; but that was the one weak point in Helen's character. She found it very hard to say "no." She was always too ready to believe when people told her that the pain caused by her refusal would be deep and lasting, and it grieved her to think that her sister might accuse her of selfishness if she were to hold back in the present instance. And then if anything occurred to break off Cecilia's marriage, would it not be her fault ?

But the unceasing anxiety she felt at the thought of the risk she was about to run—it would have been less trying if the man she was about to meet had been any man but Percival—betrayed itself in her manner. She was so silent and absent during dinner that once or twice her husband asked if she felt ill, and as half-past nine drew near, she glanced piteously at her

sister, as though imploring to be released from her promise.

The sitting-rooms at Beauwood Chase opened one into the other ; thus the small dining-room, which the family used when they were alone, led at one side into the large dining-room, and at the other into the library ; out of the latter a *portière* led into the drawing-room.

Lamps were lighted in the library, for it was into that room the small party always adjoined after dinner, and Lord Forrester, as usual, took his *Times* and sat down, expecting that his wife would take her seat at the other side of the little table that held his reading-lamp ; but Mrs. Westbrook took the vacant place in the most natural manner in the world, and Helen, having noticed that her husband did not even turn his head, and hoping that he would not miss her for at least half an hour, went noiselessly through the *portière*, and

putting a shawl, which she had taken the precaution to bring from her room for the purpose, over her white dress, she went through one of the French windows and walked quickly across the pleasure-ground, which lay between the house and the deserted garden.

She could not help thinking, as she went, of those evenings long ago, as it seemed to her now, that she used to meet Captain Percival under the trees by the river side.

The moon was almost full, and long before she reached the appointed place she saw that Percival was waiting for her, or rather for Mrs. Westbrook. The remarkable likeness between the figures and walk of the sisters deceived him.

"You are late, Queenie," he said, in his familiar manner. Then, as he came nearer, he started back again, saying, in a very different tone, "Good heavens, Lady Forrester, is it you?"

"Yes," she said—"I have come for Cecilia——"

"Then let me beg of you to go back directly," he interrupted earnestly. "Why did you let her persuade you to come? Surely she must know the risk you are running. What would Lord Forrester say if he were to find you here at this hour? Believe me," he added still more earnestly, as he went forward a step or two and took her hand respectfully. "I am speaking to you now as if you were my own sister. You have no reason to think well of me, for I was mad enough to tempt you to do a very foolish thing, and to deceive you most cruelly, but your own courage and good sense saved you. Let me atone for an act which I have always most sincerely regretted by asking you now to go back at once."

"But Cecilia's message!" cried Helen, touched by his manner.

"She must find some other messenger," he answered. "Or I can imagine what she has to tell me, heartless creature that she is. You shall not stay here one moment longer. Forgive me if I am peremptory, but you cannot tell what eyes may be on us even now."

Believing that it was Mrs. Westbrook whom he saw coming towards him from the house, Percival had come from the garden through the ruin, and the short colloquy between him and Helen had taken place under an ivy-grown wall, upon which the full light of the moon was streaming, he could but hope, therefore, that she had escaped observation, as—her mission unfulfilled—she went quickly back to the house.

When she re-entered the library, she found Lord Forrester there alone. The expression of his face terrified her, and she crossed the room quickly to his side.

"What is the matter, Arthur?" she cried. "Why do you look at me like that?"

For a short time after Helen had gone out Lord Forrester continued to read, only vaguely conscious that the lady in the white dress at the other side of his little table was not his wife. Then he looked up suddenly, and found that his companion was Mrs. Westbrook.

"Where is Helen?" he said.

"She was here but a moment ago. She has gone out, I fancy," replied Cecilia, with perfect unconcern.

"Gone out! Impossible! She never goes out at this hour unless I am with her. I fear she is ill. She seemed so out of spirits at dinner."

He got up and went to the window. The blinds had not been drawn down, but the lights within made the night appear dark outside. He went into the drawing-

room, and, with a slight exclamation, Mrs. Westbrook got up and followed him. It was impossible to tell what might or might not be visible in the moonlight. But just as she got through the *portière*, her brother-in-law called her to come to him. "Cecilia," he said, and his voice was unsteady with suppressed agitation, "do you see those two figures there by the ruin, in the moonlight? Can you tell me who they are?"

"That is Helen in the white dress, and I suppose she is talking to one of the gardeners."

"Gardeners!" repeated Lord Forrester scornfully. "Ladies do not generally hold consultations with their gardeners by moonlight. No, that man is some one whom my wife is afraid or ashamed to meet in her own house publicly, and so she appoints to meet him there. Can you tell me who he is, or must I go and find out for myself?"

“ Oh ! pray do not go out and make a scene,” cried Mrs. Westbrook imploringly ; “ and do not, I entreat of you, ask me any questions. I cannot pretend that I do not know the man ; I knew Helen was going to meet him to-night, and she—she asked me to keep you amused.”

“ When I was talking to you about your marriage the other day,” replied Lord Forrester, “ you said something about Captain Percival and a married woman whom I was afraid at the time to think might be my wife ; I believe she is standing out there with him at this moment, and what object but one could they have for meeting secretly ? Yes, I see by your face that I am right. Now tell me what intimacy there was between them before her marriage ?”

“ Do not ask me,” pleaded Mrs. Westbrook, “ and believe me that it is far better for you not to know.”

"Far better?" he repeated angrily. "As if I could rest satisfied now with less than the whole truth! You must tell me!"

"Never!" she cried, turning from him as she saw that the interview between her sister and Captain Percival was over, as Helen was on her way back. "And if you must know, ask Helen herself, but remember I have warned you."

She left him, and he left the window and went back to his place in the library to await the appearance of his wife.

It would be impossible to describe the miserable thoughts that filled his mind at that moment. From the happiest of men he had been, as if by magic, changed into the most wretched. With such evidence before him, and with another tale still to be heard, could he doubt, not only that his wife—his beautiful, his idolized Helen, was faithless, but that she had deceived him even before their marriage? And to think that

her lover was Percival—the man against whom he had so often warned her, and whom she had professed to dislike; how they must have laughed together over his incredulity!

As he stood thinking thus, his eyes were fixed upon the *portière*; he felt as if the first sight of that fair, deceitful face would drive him mad.

CHAPTER XIV.

BUT he was outwardly calm enough when she came up to him and asked him what was wrong. He shook her hand from his arm as if it burned him, and turned upon her with a fierceness of which she did not think he was capable.

“You ask what is the matter,” he said, scornfully, “and yet I have just seen you bid adieu to your lover, the man who was your lover before you married me, and yet not two hours ago you called me your own dear Arthur.”

“What do you know?” cried Helen, wildly. “Who has told you?”

"I know that there is some disgraceful secret connecting your name with that of Captain Percival. I have been told that it is far better for me not to ask any questions; but I am determined to know the worst, the full extent of my disgrace."

"Oh! Arthur," and she clung to him with all her strength, "there is no disgrace. Oh, do not turn from me so coldly; from me, your own Helen, your wife!"

"I turn from the Helen who belongs to another as much as to me, from my faithless, guilty wife, but mine in name only from this hour. You say there is no disgrace, and yet you come back to me from—from *that* man's arms."

"Oh! no, no," she cried out again, almost bewildered by her misery. "If you had heard all that passed you would not use such cruel, insulting words. He did not know I was going to meet him, and he made me come back at once. Oh,

why—why do you not believe me?”

“Because every word you say convicts you. Captain Percival is a man of the world, and he did not wish to risk the consequences of being seen with my wife, and——”

“But we have never met except in your presence since my marriage,” interrupted Helen. “Never. I can swear it, if you wish. I do not like him; I was foolish enough to think that I cared for him once; but it was all over long, long before I became your wife, and—oh! surely, Arthur, you cannot mean all you have said, you cannot really doubt my love for you?”

Any man not blinded by jealous passion, and the keenest disappointment which can befall a human being, namely, the loss of an ideal, would have been touched by the tone of the sweet voice, and the expression of the lovely, pleading eyes.

“To lose my faith in you, Helen,” her

husband answered, "is more than enough to make me doubt your love. Compared with the position you would have had in society as Captain Percival's wife—if, indeed, he ever seriously thought of marrying a woman without a large fortune—your position as Lady Forrester is a very brilliant one, so I must be forgiven if I say that the probability is, you cared for me only because I could give you rank and—liberty."

"You are more cruel than I thought you could have been, Arthur," she answered. "And it is worse than useless for me to defend myself. I was guilty of one unfortunate act of folly before I knew you; but it was folly only, and I married you because I loved you with my whole heart. If you wish to know what that episode in my life was which I have kept hidden from you, ask your sister, she knows."

"My sister!" he repeated. "Has she helped to deceive me too? Am I never

to find anyone whom I can trust?"

"Were it not that I fear the appeal would be useless, I might, for the sake of our child, ask you to trust me again. Oh, Arthur, is it useless?" she added, impulsively, as she saw that, at the mention of his child, his face momentarily softened.

He turned to look at her, but the fact that she never had been the innocent, artless girl whose first love he fondly hoped had been given to him, was too strong for him, and the remembrance of the revelation which had still to be made to him by Lady Olivia, turned his heart to stone.

"Trust you, Helen!" he said, with bitter emphasis on the word—"never! You have deluded me with your beauty for the last time, and from this night, whether we live apart, or in the same house, we are strangers."

She turned away from him without another word, but before the door closed

upon her, a despairing sob she could not restrain broke from her full heart.

She stood for a few minutes in the hall outside in a dazed and bewildered state. What had happened had surely not happened to her—that was the thought uppermost in her mind. It could not be possible that, in one short half hour, her life could have been so entirely changed. Just before dinner, when she had been alone with her husband, he had been kind and loving as usual—but could she remember that he had ever spoken a harsh word to her? And yet now, there she was, standing alone, thrust out from him, dressed in the same dress she had worn then, and which he had admired, and with a rose in her bosom which he had himself placed there, and she had laughingly told him that he spoiled her.

The flower was a little withered now, to be sure, but that was natural enough;

what was unnatural were those terrible words, "Whether we live apart, or in the same house, we are strangers."

She gave a little laugh in the midst of her misery and perplexity as the comic side of the situation struck her for an instant. A stranger to Arthur!—living in his house as a guest might be supposed to do! Of course he did not mean it. They had become too necessary to each other for such a thing to be possible. It was naturally a shock to him to see her with Captain Percival alone at that hour; but when Cecilia allowed her to explain how it was that she had met him at all, and when Lady Olivia had told him the other tale in her own quiet way, he would relent and forgive her.

Poor Helen had great faith in Lady Olivia, and no doubt, too, she had exaggerated Arthur's anger. If she were to go back to him, he would be kinder.

She turned to the door again and opened it. Her husband had not moved, and the set sternness of his attitude would have kept back a braver woman than Helen. She stood looking at him for a few moments, hoping that he would turn and call to her ; but he did not move or look round, and she went out again, and went upstairs quickly to her sister's room.

"Come in," said Mrs. Westbrook's mellow voice, in answer to the knock. "What a time you have been!" she continued, a little pettishly, as Lady Forrester appeared. "You saw him, of course? What did he say?—and was he very angry?"

"Captain Percival was so surprised to see me in your place, and so much vexed at the risk I ran in meeting him in that clandestine way, that he would not listen to what I had to tell him——"

"The tiresome fellow!" interrupted Cecilia. "What was it to him who came?"

I must write to him now, I suppose. I think you might have managed to let him know somehow; but I daresay when you got talking about yourselves you forgot poor me. But, oh! Nellie, was Arthur very cross about it? He unfortunately saw you from the window, and I was so frightened I ran away. Did he scold you dreadfully, you poor child?"

"He did not scold me at all," Helen answered. Then she said good night, and went away to her own room.

"I wish he had scolded me," she thought, as she took out the poor rose and put it into water. "It was terrible to see the look in his eyes; and he called me a faithless, guilty wife."

She rang for her maid, only to dismiss her for the night, and then she sat on, listening for her husband's step in his dressing-room, which joined hers. In about an hour she heard it, and she got up with her

heart beating loudly. Surely he would come in and unsay those shocking words, and be kind and reasonable. She heard his hand upon the door, but instead of turning the handle, he turned the key. He had locked her away from him—there was no hope.

I do not think she ever knew how she got through that night. Her first thought was to fly out of the house, but that was mental impulse only, for she felt almost incapable of action. She lay down at last, because her trembling limbs almost gave way under her, and her head ached so furiously that she could have cried aloud in her agony. But she could not sleep, her senses were only too acute, and she fancied that there were unusual noises throughout the house all night.

For more than an hour she heard her husband moving about in his dressing-room. Part of the time his servant was with him, and

she felt sure that the man was getting some orders for a journey. Could it be possible that Arthur intended to leave her without another word? It was not only possible, but true. At half-past seven the next morning she saw him being driven away in the little brougham which was always used for going to and from the railway station.

Mrs. Westbrook was to start for town about eleven. There was another train at two, and by that Helen resolved to leave also. She would go to Lady Olivia, and implore her to bring about a reconciliation. She met her sister at breakfast, but not a word passed between them about the meeting with Captain Percival. Mrs. Westbrook was sulky, because she had still to tell him of her approaching marriage, and Helen looked wan and miserable, and she could scarcely swallow a mouthful of food, there was such a lump in her throat.

“Would it not have been wiser for me to have stayed at Beauwood,” she thought. “Perhaps he is going back to be kind and to forgive me.”

But by that time the two trains were miles apart, and if she had made a mistake it was too late to rectify it.

She was in London soon after five o'clock, and she drove at once to Beauwood House, expecting to find there her ever kind and sympathising sister-in-law, but she was told, with a surprised air, by the hall porter, that her ladyship had gone down with “my lord” to Beauwood Chase.

“There’s summat up,” was the old fellow’s comment, as he watched Helen walk slowly upstairs. “Here comes my lord before folks be well awake, and then her ladyship, she bundles up and starts hoff with him again; and a’most before I’s got my paper folded proper to begin to

read, in comes my young lady, all of a fluster like. Such goings on never is unless there's summat hup."

CHAPTER XV.

THE sudden appearance of her brother, looking at least twenty years older than when she had parted from him a few weeks before, was very startling to Lady Olivia.

“What has happened, Arthur?” she cried, getting up from her writing-table in a hurry, and scattering her papers all over the place. “Are Helen and the boy well? You look terribly ill.”

“If you had spent the night that I have, you would look ill,” he answered impatiently. “Olivia, I have made a discovery that wrings my heart. Helen is not faith-

ful to me; I saw her last night holding a clandestine meeting with a man to whom I have every reason to believe she was attached before she knew me."

"You saw her!" cried Lady Olivia, "saw her with him; is it not only hearsay?"

"I saw her with him," repeated Lord Forrester; "and she not only confessed that there was some episode in her life connected with him of which she has but too good reason to be ashamed, but she referred me to you for an explanation. I have come now at her bidding; but I am grieved to think that you must have been from the first her accomplice in deceiving me."

"Now, Arthur," said Lady Olivia, "I have not been very often obliged to doubt your common sense up to the present moment; but when you get tragical, and call your poor, harmless old sister by the grand name of accomplice, I feel inclined

to think either that your head is turned, or that you are laughing at me."

"Neither the one nor the other," replied Lord Forrester, coldly and stiffly; "and if my words do not please you, I am sorry; but if Lady Forrester has told me the truth, you are acquainted with some act of hers which would have kept me from marrying her had I known it in time. Is this so, or is it not? I must have an explanation."

"Very well," said Lady Olivia, "you shall have it. Poor Helen! her punishment is likely to be a hard one. Do you remember, Arthur, the day we arrived from Folkestone at the hotel at R——"

"Yes; perfectly. Go on."

"Do you remember that a girl took refuge in my room at the hotel, and begged of me to help her to get away from some man with whom she had been foolish enough to elope—he had promised to marry

her the next day?—the man was Captain Percival, the girl was Helen Calvert, now your wife.”

Never before had Lady Olivia seen her brother so completely lose his self-control. His eyes blazed, and his voice shook with passion.

“And you let me marry her?” he said. “You let me call wife a woman who had run away from home with a man like Percival? Oh! Olivia, was that love for me? I know how lenient you are to women whom the world calls by very hard names; but I did not think you would have been carried so far by your philanthropy as to allow one of the class to become my wife.”

“There was not any philanthropy in the matter, good or bad,” answered Lady Olivia, in her brusque manner. “I did not know that the girl you married and the girl whom I had rescued were

one and the same until I met her at Beau-wood on my return from Florence. I carefully avoided hearing the poor child's name that afternoon at R——; but this I do know, and all your raving, and your angry suspicions, cannot change my opinion: that Helen was as pure as snow, and that she was most heartily sorry for having allowed herself to be deceived by that man."

"Pure as snow, and living at an hotel with a man who was not her husband! Olivia! how can you be so blind? How can you dare to defend her?"

"I can dare anything in the cause of truth," replied the sturdy old lady. "I know she was not deceiving me when she told me that she had arrived at the hotel only an hour or two before she came to me. She has told me the whole story over again since; how she overheard, from the balcony of her room, a conversation between Cap-

tain Percival and a friend of his, which enlightened her as to his real motive in bringing her away, and her state of fright and misery when I found her was too real to have been put on for a purpose. And then again, when we met for the first time after her marriage, she told me that, if she had been guilty of anything worse than folly, she could not have been base enough to marry you."

"Of course she said so, my dear sister. Women are always very honourable and high-minded when it is their interest to be so. Why did she ever run away with him?"

"Why are girls continually doing idiotic things?" replied Lady Olivia. "She was very young, and she had no reason to suppose that the man was promising what he did not mean to perform. How could she tell, without experience? But she pulled up bravely, the moment she found him out,

and it is hard that her life and happiness, and yours as well, should be wrecked and ruined for ever, because she made a mistake when she was little more than a child."

"But you seem to forget entirely that she has not given him up. I saw her with him last night. It was probably not their first meeting; and they never met secretly, at ten o'clock at night, to talk about the weather!" And Lord Forrester laughed grimly.

"I do not pretend to account for *that* piece of idiocy," answered Lady Olivia, "but I think it is more than probable that the meeting was the first, that Mrs. Westbrook is at the bottom of it, and that poor Helen is too good-natured to betray her. I am sure she has so entangled herself with Captain Percival that she has hard work to get free. Poor Edward Saville, he has not behaved too well in some respects, but he deserves a better fate than he has before

him as Cecilia Westbrook's husband."

"I cannot think that Mrs. Westbrook would have had any scruple about meeting Percival herself, if a secret interview with him was necessary. In short, turn and twist the facts as you will, you cannot alter them, nor alter my opinion as regards Helen. I can never trust her again."

"Never!" repeated Lady Olivia, now fairly roused. "Do you know all that implies, Arthur? Surely you cannot be serious! I know it must be hard upon a man of your peculiar ideas to find out that your wife has not always been quite sensible, but I believe you love her too dearly not to overlook all that is past, if the affair of last night can be traced to Mrs. Westbrook."

"No," he answered, without the slightest hesitation, "I cannot overlook it. You may think I am cold, and hard, and unforgiving, if you will, but my love for her

died last night. I have told her so—she knows that the old life is over for ever.”

He tried to speak with calm unconcern, as if the death of his love for his beautiful wife were a matter of no great importance after all; but even as the words passed his lips, he knew that he loved her still as fondly as he had done the day she stood by his side a bride.

But the more he felt conscious of all this, the more he hardened his heart against her. He pictured her to himself triumphing in secret over the successful deception of the too fond and confiding husband, and he swore to himself that forgiveness was impossible.

Lady Olivia at length gave up her efforts to bring him into a more reasonable state of mind. He was perfectly calm in the end, and listened to all her arguments with patience; but she might as well have tried to move a stone.

"Then remember my words—you will live to repent your harshness," she said at last, as she went to prepare herself to go back with him to Beauwood, in order to break to Helen the changes that were inevitable, if her husband continued to keep up his obstinate distrust of her.

He did not intend to have a formal separation if the secret meeting of the night before could be satisfactorily explained. If it were proved that Mrs. Westbrook had had no hand in it, then Helen was to live on at Beauwood Chase with her child until he was old enough to go to school, and she was to have an allowance befitting her rank; but if she refused to make a promise never to see Captain Percival again, or to hold any communication with him, the child was to be taken from her, and kept under his father's care.

"I consider the propositions simply in-

sulting to your wife under the circumstances," Lady Olivia said, when Lord Forrester had told her his plans. "You intend to keep up an appearance of unity, if that unlucky meeting of last night can be explained. You will live in the same house with Helen, and go into society with her, and all the time you are to be like strangers! If she has any spirit, she will not submit to such treatment. But she is so fond of you, I believe the more you ill-use her, the more she will cling to you."

"I have no wish to be clung to," Lord Forrester had replied, in his coldest manner. And then he declined to discuss the matter further with his sister.

When they arrived at the Chase late in the afternoon, Lord Forrester was beyond measure surprised, angry, and more suspicious than ever to find that Helen had left.

"What do you think now?" he said: "Can it be possible that she has eloped with him?"

"It is about the most improbable thing in the world," Lady Olivia replied, with something very like contempt in her voice. "Captain Percival has no intention of eloping with anyone, unless he can get Mrs. Westbrook to run away with him. I could forgive him heartily for that. I believe I hate the woman. Perhaps it is a sin, but I cannot help it. She always makes me feel, when I see her, as if Dickens were brushing my hair the wrong way."

Lord Forrester turned away impatiently, while his sister relieved her feelings by abusing Mrs. Westbrook.

"Then, as you are so very certain that Lady Forrester has not openly disgraced herself and me," he said, when the old lady paused, "perhaps you will be good enough

to tell me what, in your opinion, has become of her?"

"Well, she may have gone to Rutland Gate to her sister—but I hope she has gone to Beauwood House to me, poor darling! It will break her heart not to find me there. Remember, Arthur, that wherever she stays, I stay too. You may turn her out of your house, if you like, but I am not going to give her up."

"As you like," he replied coldly. "I wish with all my heart that I could believe in her as you do."

As it was impossible for Lady Olivia to get back to town that night, she was obliged to stay at Beauwood, and to restrain, as best she could, her impatience to see Helen. But at eight o'clock the next morning she was off, having given her brother a promise to write at once, to say where his wife really was.

No words can express the extreme tenderness with which Lady Olivia greeted her young sister-in-law.

"I knew you would come to me, you poor ill-used darling," she said, clasping the sorrowful girl in her arms. "Arthur is behaving like a madman, or, still worse, like a fool. How did it all come out?—and what induced you to give that man a clandestine meeting? I cannot believe that he has ever made love to you since your marriage——"

"Never!" interrupted Helen, earnestly. "I met him that night on—on business. He told me himself that I had done a very foolish thing, and he begged of me to leave him at once."

"You need not try to deceive me, my dear Helen," said Lady Olivia, affectionately embracing her. "I am sure you went out that night in your sister's place, and she is mean enough to let you bear the

blame. She is always scheming and planning, but she is far too clever to get herself into a scrape. But I have a power over her she knows nothing of at present, and she shall confess her share in this unhappy business, or she has seen Edward Saville for the last time. She wants to have her wedding at Beauwood Chase, does she not?" Lady Olivia continued. "That will be another complication, unless that magnificent husband of yours——"

"You must not abuse Arthur to me," Helen interrupted.

"It is not abuse to call him magnificent," replied Lady Olivia. "You ought to be very much obliged to me for not having said that fool of a husband!"

But although Lady Olivia forced herself to treat the whole affair lightly to Helen, she knew only too well that her brother would not give way, and that time would, in all probability, harden his heart instead

of softening it. But she had quite made up her mind to make Mrs. Westbrook confess to him that it was for her, and at her instigation, Helen had met Captain Percival, and, in order to strengthen her hand in the approaching encounter with Cecilia, she determined to take with her, unopened, the letter which had been given to her by Edgar Westbrook a short time before his death. She was too honourable and high-minded to possess herself of the secret it contained unless it was absolutely necessary.

CHAPTER XVI.

LADY OLIVIA was fortunate enough to find Mrs. Westbrook at home. She did not know it, of course, but it was the day of Saville's return, and Cecilia was waiting for him.

"How very kind of you to call, dear Lady Olivia," she said, as she got up to meet her unexpected visitor. "I am really afraid there must be something wrong, you honour me so rarely. Not with the dear little boy, I hope? He was so well when I left Beauwood yesterday."

"How the woman does talk!" thought Lady Olivia. "He is quite well, thank

you," she added shortly, aloud, for she was not in the mood for polite platitudes; "but there is a great deal wrong with which, at present, he has no concern. I have come to ask you whether you did or did not make an appointment to meet Captain Percival in the grounds at Beauwood Chase the night before last?"

Mrs. Westbrook drew up her head.

"I cannot see, Lady Olivia," she said, "how my answer to that question, be it yes or no, can affect you in any way."

"It does not affect me personally, but it concerns my brother and his wife. You know that Lord Forrester saw Helen with Captain Percival that night, and it would be but fair to her to tell him that she met him for you, and at your request; she has not told me what was your object in sending her, but I have no doubt it was to tell him of your approaching marriage."

"But surely, Lady Olivia, if your

brother is—forgive me for speaking plainly—so stupid as to suspect his wife upon such very trivial grounds, Helen ought to be too proud to defend herself. And besides, if she had never done anything foolish, poor dear——”

“Never mind Helen’s folly!” interrupted Lady Olivia impatiently, “you cannot possibly object to clear her in the matter of the assignation.”

“And then Arthur will think it his duty to tell Mr. Saville, and he is so jealous of me that he will break off our marriage. No, Lady Olivia, if Helen had been a little less clumsy, and gone out of the moonlight instead of standing full in it, everything would have gone right. And then, as it happened, she did not deliver any message to Captain Percival, and I refuse to compromise myself by admitting that she had any message from me to deliver,” and Mrs. Westbrook leaned back in her chair with

an air that said as plainly as words, "Now, you dreadful old woman, do your worst."

Lady Olivia flushed all over her fine old face.

"Do you see that?" she said, suddenly taking the letter from her pocket and holding it up before Mrs. Westbrook. She did not know it herself, but she was a very theatrical old lady, and rather liked taking people by surprise.

"You have not quite forgotten your husband, I suppose," she went on. "When I first met him he was not married, but he was madly in love with you, and he was never tired of talking about you; the next time I met him he was a bridegroom; the third time he had been some years your husband, and although I could see how dearly he loved you still, I also saw that his lover's delusions had all vanished, and that his heart was broken. He never made a confidant of me, but having, as he

told me, poor fellow, a curious presentiment that you would one day be mixed up in the fate of some one whom I loved, he gave me this sealed letter, and told me that the contents of it would enable me to force you into compliance with my wishes. Now I need hardly tell you, Mrs. Westbrook, that it is a matter of indifference to me personally what portion of your private history is written down here; but if you are obstinate, and refuse to clear Helen, this letter shall be opened, not by me, but by Mr. Saville."

"And Mr. Saville will refuse to open it," cried Mrs. Westbrook. "My dear Lady Olivia, such a threat is beneath you, and this is not the age of sealed confessions and secret crimes! Just ask yourself what I could have done that, if known to my husband, would not long since have come to light? It was only one of his many hallucinations, poor fellow! As you know

so much about him, you probably know that he died quite mad! You are welcome to open that mysterious letter, and to read it here before me, if you like. I am really curious to know what it is all about."

Fairly checkmated, Lady Olivia turned the letter about in her fingers.

"And do you mean to tell me that you do not care whether Mr. Saville reads this or not?"

For one moment Cecilia hesitated, then she said—

"I cannot honestly say that. Every word of it may be false, but falsehoods have weight. You see how your brother is blinded by appearances at this moment, and to prove to you that I am not quite as black as you wish to paint me, I am willing to write to Arthur, and exonerate my sister completely. Do you think, when I have done so, that he will overlook that little affair before her marriage?"

"I do not know," answered Lady Olivia, as shortly as possible.

Mrs. Westbrook went to her writing-table, and rapidly covered a sheet of note-paper. Then she put it up, but gave it still open to her visitor.

"You will see that I have not spared myself," she said. "I know I gave Captain Percival too much encouragement, and I fear he is likely to prove troublesome."

Lady Olivia was reading the letter as Mrs. Westbrook spoke. It was written in her very best style, and it took the blame altogether away from Helen.

"Are you satisfied?" Cecilia said.

"Perfectly," replied Lady Olivia. "And if I have hurt your feelings, I must beg of you to forgive me."

She got up as she spoke, and held out her hand.

"My feelings are not hurt, thank you,"

Cecilia said, as she took it. "Have you forgotten this?" she added, taking up the sealed letter, which Lady Olivia had left on the table—but she waited until her visitor had reached the door.

"Oh! no," was the answer. "You can destroy it. I do not want to see it again." And so Mrs. Westbrook remained the victor, not for the first time.

As soon as she was alone, she opened the letter, and read it through. It contained, as she suspected, the story of the diamond ring, and a solemn declaration from Edgar that his wife, Cecilia Westbrook, had gained her large fortune by chicanery.

"I did that very well," she said, as she tore up the letter into minute fragments. "If the poor dear old lady had but known what a fright I was in! And yet they could not have proved it."

At the same moment she heard the doors

of a hansom give their well-known bang, and the hall-bell answered an eager pull. There was a step—too long unheard—upon the stairs, and in a few seconds she was clasped in Edward Saville's arms!

He had come back to her, he was her own at last, and neither the dead nor the living, she thought, could separate them now.

Armed with Mrs. Westbrook's confession, Lady Olivia made another attack upon her brother, but although he admitted that so far Helen was blameless, the damning fact of the elopement could not be explained away. Her story *might* be true, but she could not deny that she had been on sufficiently intimate terms with Captain Percival to run away with him.

It was quite a case of "Cæsar's wife," and the very worst side of Lord Forrester's character came out at that crisis. He would

not separate publicly from his wife, but he would not hear of a reconciliation with her.

"I cannot believe in her again," he said. "I could never feel sure that she was not deceiving me. Just think how well she must have acted not to let me even suspect that I was not her first love!"

So he went on, until Lady Olivia lost all patience with him, and declared that he was acting in the most cruel and unjustifiable manner. But it would be hard to say whether the husband or wife suffered the most. Poor Helen felt as if the loss of her happiness was a sort of judgment upon her for her folly in the past, an idea which was scouted by Lady Olivia with her usual energy.

"Pooh! nonsense! my dear child, there are no judgments in this age; and I am sure it is very well for Arthur that it is so, or he might expect something dreadful to

happen to him for his cruelty to you."

"No, it has been all my own fault," Helen would cry out in defence of her beloved Arthur. "I cannot blame him, and no one shall ever blame him to me."

And so she lived on, gently submissive to all his wishes, pining for a reconciliation, but dreading a repulse too much to ask for it, while he set himself resolutely to the hard and unnatural task of putting her completely out of his heart and thoughts, but he was too proud to admit that he failed more and more dismally every day.

As soon as she found that everything was not going on smoothly at Beauwood, Mrs. Westbrook changed all her plans, and decided that her marriage should take place from her own house in London. She was sometimes half inclined to be provoked with Saville for being so passively acquiescent in all her arrangements. There was a gravity, amounting almost to melan-

choly, about him which was not only very puzzling, but also very irritating, to a woman of her lively temperament. Why should he have so suddenly lost the brightness that had been so conspicuous an attribute of the gay, happy youth to whom, unasked, she had given her love?

With such a future before him, why should he sit sometimes abstracted, silent, gloomy, it might be said? Did it not show some strange perversity on his part to live on day after day in apparent apathy and indifference, and yet with the consciousness that every moment, as it passed, was bringing him nearer to the happy hour that would give him the most beautiful and the richest woman in England for his wife?

Mrs. Westbrook could not help acknowledging to herself that she was bitterly disappointed. Gratitude, respectful but genuine admiration, a delicate regard for

her feelings, and a thoughtful but brother-like and undemonstrative affection, all those she received without stint; but from his letters, she had expected something very different. She did not want to be looked up to reverently, and to receive homage such as a subject might offer to his queen; but to be loved as a mere woman by this most attractive young fellow whom she had chosen out of all the world!

At last, after a sharp struggle with herself, Mrs. Westbrook resigned herself to the inevitable, and did her best to humour Saville's moods. What did it signify, after all, whether he was cold and friendly during the short time of their engagement? when she was his wife the icy barriers would fall away of their own accord. So she never reproached him for his silence and coldness, but let him come and go as he pleased, and if sometimes, when he came to spend the evening with her, he would abstract

himself in a book or newspaper instead of talking or singing to her as of old, when they were not lovers, she was careful not to show the slightest symptom of annoyance or discontent.

She had, too, at that time, a great deal of business on her hands. She had never since her widowhood, or during the five years of her marriage, lived up to even the half of her splendid income, and with a portion of the money thus saved she had bought a beautiful house and estate in Surrey, immediately after her engagement with Saville. She knew that he preferred country life, and she planned to surprise him by going to this new home for the honeymoon, allowing him to imagine that the place had been lent to her by a friend, until they were actually settled there, when she meant to reveal the secret that being hers it was also his.

She gave up her villa at Richmond, and

transferred the servants who lived there to her new establishment. She furnished the house with the most exquisite taste, and the room intended as a study for her husband was fitted up with every modern luxury ; in fact she spared neither trouble nor expense to make it perfect in every detail.

The man who had hitherto written his pretty songs and his gayest pieces upon an old writing table, covered with ink splotches, and of the value of a few shillings only, was henceforth, if all went well, to sit before an elaborate piece of furniture, full of drawers, recesses, and contrivances, and made of dark unpolished Belgian oak, with appointments in quaint designs of oxidised silver. It did not occur to her that the unaccustomed luxury of his new surroundings might damp his imagination ; but then, why should the husband of a woman as rich as she use his brains to amuse the public?

Mrs. Westbrook went down into Surrey very often to visit her new estate, for she had not bought merely a house with pleasure-grounds attached, but she had a large farm and very extensive shooting, and she hired keepers; and having been fortunate enough to find an honest and competent man for the head of the game department, she was not robbed as much as might have been expected.

When Captain Percival heard of the purchase of the estate, he felt rather envious, for he was a thorough good sportsman, and he, too, liked a country life; but when he heard of the engagement to Saville, he said some very hard things about women in general, and about Mrs. Westbrook in particular. Then he resigned himself to his fate with that equanimity which was one of his chief characteristics.

His admiration for Mrs. Westbrook's beauty was as great as ever. He always

maintained that she was the prettiest and finest woman he had ever seen ; but his respect for her may be estimated by his remarks to a friend with whom he discussed her approaching marriage.

“He is a lucky fellow, and no mistake about it, to get her and all that money,” he said. “But I am ready to bet an even hundred that she would run away with me before the end of the year.”

“Let’s know if you mean to ask her, old fellow,” was the reply. And so Saville’s future wife was spoken of in a well-known West End club.

CHAPTER XVII.

SAVILLE generally spent his evenings at Rutland Gate. Mrs. Westbrook rarely saw him at any other time, and although she often questioned him closely, he would not tell her exactly how his days were spent.

"I am writing," he used to answer, which was true enough, but not all the truth, for, after perhaps an hour spent at his old writing-table, he used to go out of town by rail, and then walk miles and miles about the country, coming back weary in mind and body to dine at his club; and then, without much life or

brightness about him, he would drive to Rutland Gate, to spend a couple of hours with the woman whom he tried very hard to love as he loved his lost Leda, but whom he could only admire heartily, as he might have done a beautiful picture.

It must be confessed that Mrs. Westbrook spared no pains to make herself look lovely and pleasing in his eyes. She wore the colours that he liked best; she carefully avoided following any fashion which she had heard him condemn as inelegant or inartistic, and she generally succeeded in winning his approval and admiration, but not anything more.

"You look handsomer than ever to-night, dear one," he said one evening, about a week before the day fixed for the marriage, when he had, as usual, come in between eight and nine. It was his habit to put his arm round her, and to kiss her gravely and quietly, as her brother might have

done, while she fastened a flower in his coat.

"And you are later than ever!" she answered, looking up at him with such loving eyes. "It has been such a long, dreary day to me! Oh, how different it will be when we are always together—when I can see you every hour and moment, if I like."

"Yes, dear, if you do not get tired of such a stupid, good-for-nothing fellow as I am," he answered. "You are so full of life, and I am so dull; I have felt so down-hearted all day. There has been a sort of presentiment hanging over me; I cannot account for it, but I cannot shake it off. And look here, love," he added, taking up a newspaper he had thrown upon the table when he came in. "You remember that play of mine, 'For Love and Life?' I see here it has been having a run in Manchester, and last night the poor girl

who was playing Gertrude"—how vividly they both remembered Leda as he spoke—"fell through a trap-door on the stage and was terribly hurt, internal injuries, they say. The trap was not to be used in the piece at all, but the stupid people had forgotten to fasten it properly."

"Poor thing ! I suppose she is dead by this," Cecilia said ; she was not very much interested in the affair.

"I am sorry anyone should have been hurt acting in my play," Saville continued, without noticing Mrs. Westbrook's unsympathetic tone. "How strange if it were poor Leda!" he added, after a pause.

"Not at all likely," Cecilia answered. "I am sure she married some rich City merchant who fell in love with her acting, and she probably drives her Victoria every day about Croydon or Blackheath as happy as possible."

"Do you think so?" said Saville.

"Somehow I cannot think that she is married."

"Unfortunately for morality it is quite possible to have a Victoria without a wedding ring," laughed Mrs. Westbrook, wilfully misunderstanding his meaning. "My dear Edward, what a baby you are in some things!"

"Perhaps so," he answered, releasing himself quickly from the radiant creature who was leaning lovingly against him.

She pouted and looked vexed, but her iceberg of a lover stood quite unmoved, and she turned away from him with tears of mortification in her eyes.

When about eleven he got up to leave, she held out her hand and said good night coldly, but with a quiver in her voice which she could not hide.

Saville's heart was touched by her sadness.

"What a bear I am to you sometimes,

dear," he said, as he drew her towards him, "and how good and kind you are to me."

"Do you love me, Edward?" she cried, hiding her face upon his breast, while she trembled all over with emotion and excitement. "If you do, I can bear your coldness, although it is very trying sometimes. The ice on the surface cannot chill me," she added, looking up at him with a tearful attempt at playfulness, "if I can feel quite sure that the fire burns beneath."

"How could any man help loving you?" he answered, taking her beautiful face between his hands. "How many poor fellows have you slain in your short life?"

"But you are not 'any man,'" she persisted, "you are one in a thousand."

"Then one in a thousand is not wholly a block of marble, and he is grateful to you from the very bottom of his heart," he answered, as he stooped and lightly

touched her lips. Then, releasing her, he said good night gaily and was gone.

With a lighter heart than usual, he walked along towards Piccadilly, and by the time he reached his club, he had taken himself to task with no small amount of severity.

"What more can I want to make me happy?" he thought. "Surely the love of that beautiful woman ought to content one even so exacting and fastidious as I am."

There were a few letters awaiting him at the club; one of them bore the Manchester postmark, and the sight of the handwriting made his heart beat fast. In a second everything was plainly revealed before him; the accident at the theatre had taken place at Manchester, and without doubt the actress who had been injured was Leda. But why had she written to him?

His hands shook so violently that he

could hardly open the letter, and when at last he did so, it was some seconds before he could master the contents, and yet only a few words were scrawled over the paper. "*Come to me—I am dying.*" The signature of "Leda" could hardly be deciphered, it was so indistinct. But he had read enough, more than enough. Leda was dying, and had asked him to come to her. Ah! if Mrs. Westbrook had seen the despairing look in his eyes as he folded up the letter, and began to search hurriedly upon the table for a railway guide, she must have known once for all to whom the love she coveted had been irrevocably given.

There was not a fast train to Manchester until early the following morning, so Saville was obliged to wait with all the patience he could muster; but it was absolutely necessary for him to let Mrs. Westbrook know what had happened, for

if poor Leda lingered for any time, it would be impossible for him to come back to town by the day appointed for his marriage. Indeed, in any case he felt that he must ask for a postponement; he could not marry while the woman whom he had so dearly loved was upon her death-bed, or, as it might be, but a few days in her grave.

Strange to say, he did not find any difficulty in writing to Cecilia. He had entirely forgotten the unsympathetic manner in which she had listened to the account of the accident, and her flippant and heartless remarks about Leda. He told her simply that his presentiment of evil had been but too quickly realised—that the actress who had been hurt at Manchester was really Leda Fortescue, and that she had written to him to come to her, as she was dying.

“ I know your kind heart, and that you

will forgive me, dearest," he wrote, "for complying with this request. I cannot forget that, whatever she may be *now*, she was once very dear to me, and I am sure you will, for my sake, agree to have our marriage put off for a short time. It may be that I shall find her released from all her sufferings."

When she read the letter, Mrs. Westbrook's fervent prayer was that Leda might be "released" before Saville's arrival. "If she is able to speak to him," she thought, "I have seen him for the last time." She was not given to "cast the shadow of uncertain evils," but the day she spent imagining the revelation which it was but too certain would be made by Leda if Saville found her alive and conscious, was the most miserable she had ever lived through. The disgrace of being found out was as nothing compared with the misery of losing Saville's regard.

To endure the suspense in inaction, shut up in the London house, was intolerable. So she went down into Surrey, to her beautiful new home, to make fresh arrangements for the pleasure and comfort of its future master.

But, in spite of all her efforts, the awful fear that it might be all for naught, haunted her at every step. She superintended the hanging of some of his favourite pictures which she had lately bought for him, and as she walked round the room when the workmen had carried off their ladders, she said to herself, "Shall I ever have him with me to admire them?—my very own, from whom not all the old loves in the world can separate me?" Then she would break down into bitter tears, not of sorrow for her own unwomanly and unlawful double-dealing in the past, but of anger and disappointment at the threatened overthrow of all her cherished plans.

What was to be her fate if that "boy," as she called him, upon whom she had been weak enough to set her heart, were to desert her now at the bidding of a woman who had given him up at the very first hint that his love was a delusion? It would make such a nine days' wonder amongst her friends; some of them would pity her, and others, no doubt, would ridicule, and to be pitied or ridiculed would be equally unbearable to her proud spirit.

Would it be possible, she wondered, by a little skilful artifice, to bring Percival back to his allegiance, if Saville threw her over at the last? It would be very hard to see him enjoying all the good things she had prepared for Saville (that pretty study, for instance, how out of place he would look in it!) in that easy, careless way of his! But what did it signify, after all? he was very fond of her, and he suited her in

many ways, and there was not a man in the world worth breaking one's heart about. Look at Helen's love-match, how it had turned out. Yes, if Saville threw her over, she would marry Percival as soon as possible; she was tired of living alone as Mrs. Westbrook, she must have a new name.

So she mused, as she walked about through the large, handsome, empty rooms of Ranmore Lodge. She was restless, impatient, and angry at her own impotence to make events shape themselves exactly as she wished. She wanted so little, after all, she thought. She wanted to have her own way in her own way, and she wanted not to be found out.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BUT even as Mrs. Westbrook tried to talk herself into the belief that in a few hours Saville would be at her side again, he was hearing from the lips of the dying Leda the miserable story of the deception which had been practised upon her, and he had sworn a great oath that never again would he look upon the fair, false face of Cecilia Westbrook.

The meeting between him and Leda had been almost unnaturally calm, considering the thoughts that filled the hearts of both as they silently clasped hands. He did not dare to let her see how deeply he

was moved to find her lying so white and apparently so helpless. It seemed as if the months which had passed were all swept out of his memory; and yet what a sad and terrible change was there! When he had parted from her, she was well and strong, and in all the pride of her youth, beauty, and health; now she was more helpless than a child, with one limb broken, and suffering, moreover, acute agony from some severe internal injury, from which the doctors who had been called in had declared that recovery was impossible.

The pain subsided at intervals, and it was during one of those brief seasons of full consciousness that Saville was allowed to visit her.

Their hands met, and they remained looking at one another in silence for some minutes. Leda's face was sadly wan and pinched-looking from the severe suffering she had gone through, but the beautiful eyes,

from which her lover had drawn so much of his inspiration, were as softly bright as of old. He did not know how much of their lustre had been brought back by seeing him.

"I was afraid you would not come," she said at last—"or that my letter might not find you until it was too late. I did not think you would be in town just now."

"I have not been long in England," he answered. "I have been abroad again." He laid a slight emphasis on "again."

"I suppose so," she said, thinking he had been travelling since his marriage, with his bride. She wanted to ask for his wife, but she could not do so just then. "I wrote to you," she went on quite calmly, after a pause, "because the doctors all tell me that my case is quite hopeless; in fact, they are surprised that I have lived so long. I am glad that the last part I played was 'Gertrude.'"

"How did it happen, Leda?" Saville forced himself to ask.

There were many subjects connected with her upon which he longed to be enlightened; but somehow it seemed impossible to allude to them. It was probable, too, that at any moment his right to be with her at all might be questioned by her husband, for he was still of opinion that she had left him to be married to another lover. Why she had sent for him under those circumstances, he could not tell, but if the old first love had re-asserted itself, it was not for him to blame her. So, hardly knowing what to say that might not give her pain, he asked her about the accident.

"I scarcely know how it happened," Leda answered, while a great quiver of pain passed over her face. "It was in that scene where Gertrude is in her grandmother's cottage, and, if you remember,

there is not any carpet on the stage. I was in the middle of one of my speeches, when I felt the floor give way under me, and I do not remember anything after that. When I recovered consciousness, I found myself here in my own room. They say it was a miracle I was not killed on the spot. Do not look so sorry about it, Edward," she added, laying her hand upon his arm. "I am not sorry to be so near my death. There is an idea in the world that actresses must be bad women, living without thought, and dying without hope. I could tell a very different tale. Had my hopes been bounded by this world's narrow round, I do not think I could have lived through the bitter misery of losing you."

"And yet you left me of your own free will," cried Saville, surprised—"left me, as I supposed, because you did not love me enough to be my wife."

"Enough!" she repeated. "I wonder what men call enough. I left you, Edward, because I loved you too well to stand between you and happiness. Tell me, are you not married to Mrs. Westbrook?"

"No; but our wedding-day is fixed for a week hence. Do not take away your hand, Leda. You gave it to me when you thought I was already her husband. My poor darling! my own dear unselfish Leda! I fear there has been some terrible delusion on your part. Will you not believe my positive assurance that the idea of marrying Mrs. Westbrook never entered my head until long after I believed I had lost you for ever? I saw her the very day I found that you had disappeared, but when I went abroad again—and I started within four-and-twenty hours—we parted as friends only. She was very, very kind to me. A man with more vanity than I might have thought that a feeling warmer

than friendship prompted her kindness, but if the idea occurred to me I put it away at once. Every thought of my heart was given to you. I do not think you could have known how dear you were to me. Mrs. Westbrook wrote to me constantly, and I wrote to her. She urged me, after a time, to come home, and at last I could not help seeing that, if I wished to come as a suitor for her hand, she would not refuse me. But I did not come at once. I was not in love with her even then. I was flattered by her preference, and glad to think that my miserable, aimless, and lonely life might be made a little less gloomy, so I wrote, and asked her to be my wife."

"But you love her now!" cried Leda, eagerly, with her eyes fixed upon his troubled face. "You will be happy with her when I am gone."

"Had I been asked that question yes-

terday, and by other lips, I might have answered yes, and fancied that I was speaking the truth ; but, Leda, you are a million times dearer to me, lying there bruised and helpless as you are, than she could ever be. I do not pretend to unnatural stoicism, or that I have never felt the spell of her great beauty ; but even that has less power over me now than it used to have in the old days when you were cruel, and used to send me away from you. Do you remember, Leda?"

"I remember," she answered faintly. It did not occur to her to doubt his truth, and therefore Mrs. Westbrook must have cruelly deceived her. Should she tell him, or should she die with the secret unconfessed, and let the marriage take place at the time appointed ? She could not in a moment decide how far she was actuated by the desire to punish Mrs. Westbrook for her duplicity. Had Saville really begun to love

the beautiful woman who was so evidently, and so recklessly, without principle, Leda would probably have screened her for his sake, but as he did not love her, was it right to let him marry her under a delusion?

She was happily spared the trouble of a decision by Saville himself. A dim suspicion of the truth had already entered his mind, and he could not rest until the idea was either confirmed or dispelled.

"Leda," he began, gently and tenderly, as he knelt down by the bedside, in order that she might not be distressed by having to raise her voice, when the time to answer him came. "I have told you the whole truth as regards myself and Mrs. Westbrook. You said just now that you left me because you were standing in the way of my happiness. Did you mean my happiness with her?"

"Yes, with her. I believed there had

been some misunderstanding between you and her, that in a moment of pique you had bound yourself to me, and that honour alone kept you faithful, after you and she had met again at Brighton."

"You believed all this, Leda; but some one must have told you. Tell me honestly, was it Mrs. Westbrook?"

"Yes, I heard it all from her. But, oh! Edward, be merciful to her. Remember it was her love for you that tempted her——"

"You call *that* love, and you ask me to be merciful," he interrupted, slipping his arm under Leda's shoulders, and drawing her poor racked frame tenderly to him. "Merciful to the woman who separated me from you, my darling! She drove you from the shelter of my love. She did not care what became of you. Why, oh! why did you believe her? Why did you not trust me?"

"I did not reason about it. She told me you had loved her before you knew me. Looking at her and at myself, could I doubt it? Her love for you was but too evident, it spoke in every look as well as in every word, and I felt that I had no right to come between you. She could give you wealth and position with herself, I had only my love, so I went away."

"And your love was worth all the world to me!" cried Saville. He was half mad with grief and rage. "Oh! Leda, you must live for my sake!"

"Ah! if it were possible!" she answered, "but it cannot be. Our last parting, Edward, is very near, but it has been unspeakable happiness to me to know that you loved me to the very, very last."

"And when you left me, Leda, where did you hide yourself?"

"I went to the manager of the — Theatre, told him that my marriage was

broken off, and that I wanted to get an engagement out of London. He gave me an introduction to the manager here, from whom I got a very good engagement, and here I have been ever since. Do you not recognize all the old furniture I had in Church Street? I do not know if you will value it, Edward, but I have made my will, and left it, and everything I have in the world besides, to you. You will keep them for my sake, will you not?"

"Be quite sure of it," he answered. "Wherever I am, my home is likely to be a dreary one from henceforth, but in fancy I shall see you in one of the old familiar chairs."

"And you will see my kind friend, Lady Olivia; give her my dear love, and tell her as—as much of the truth as you see fit. I do not want her to think badly of you."

Almost as she was speaking, she fell off into a doze with her head supported by his

arm. She awoke again with a fresh attack of the racking pain, and the doctor took Saville almost by force from the room.

For more than an hour he walked up and down the passage outside her door. At length the moans within grew fainter, and presently the doctor came out again.

"You may go in," he said. "She is going very fast."

She was lying back upon her pillows, white as marble, and her beautiful hair was wet from the agony she had passed through. She heard Saville's step, and opened her eyes feebly; but when she tried to speak, no sound was heard. He bent over her, and again her lips moved.

"I am quite happy," she murmured, and then, with one deep sigh, her eyes slowly closed again, and she was gone.

Saville's grief was pitiable to witness; not that it was violent or extravagant, for he was outwardly calm enough; but there

was a wild look in his eyes, and he could hardly speak without breaking down. All night long, in his lonely room at the hotel in Manchester, he walked up and down, trying to realise what had happened to him. Leda had been found and lost again almost at the same moment, and the woman whom he stood pledged to marry in a few days had been proved to be unprincipled and false. In his anger and desolation he did not call her by any very gentle names.

Without pausing to think what the effect would be on Mrs. Westbrook, he wrote to her from the hotel an hour or two after Leda's death ; but his letter was a short one, he could not bring himself to say much. He wrote—

“I have heard all, and everything is at an end between us. I could not have believed that you were capable of such baseness.”

He did not tell her of Leda's death. He felt as if it would be profanation to the dead girl to mention her name to the woman who had destroyed her.

The letter posted, he grew more calm. He was at last freed from the dread of having to see Mrs. Westbrook again; he knew that, had they met, his self-control would probably give way, and that harsh, cruel words would be spoken. It did not occur to him that she would not give him up without a struggle. She had but little faith in her eloquence; but her faith in her beauty was unbounded. Surely it would once more prove irresistible? But a few years ago it had made Edgar Westbrook forget that she had robbed him of his inheritance and of his mother's trust, it must now be made to banish from Saville's mind the fact that she had separated him from the woman he had so fondly loved.

"It is worth a trial," she thought, as she read his brief letter, "he cannot help forgiving me when he knows that my 'baseness' was the result of my unconquerable love for him. Oh, how I long to bring him really to my feet, to make him suffer some of the torture to which he has condemned me!"

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.





